

## Who's Gonna Drive You Home? by LaVeraceVia

**Series:** [You Break It, You Bought It \[1\]](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Alone Together, Angst, Anxiety Attacks, Awkward Conversations, Awkwardness, Billy Needs...More Than A Hug, Boys Kissing, Canonical Child Abuse, Deep Conversations, Drinking & Talking, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, First Time, Frottage, Groin Injuries, Hand Jobs, Hangover, Huddling For Warmth, Hurt/Comfort, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Self-Harm, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Period-Typical Homophobia, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Rating May Change, Secret Relationship, Self-Discovery, Slow Burn, Snowed In, Steve Needs a Hug, Underage Drinking, Vulnerability, no beta we die like men, showering together

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**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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**Summary:**

“Steve,” she says again, with more urgency, and now he’s sure it’s Max. “I need your help.”

Steve’s pulse goes into overdrive. “Max, what’s wrong? I can get Hopper- ”

“No!” she cuts him off, talking fast. “No cops. There’s no time and, and...it’s so cold out there and—and there’s just no time okay? You

have to trust me. Please. You know the road I live on? I need you to come here now, but DO NOT stop at the house, just keep driving past it, but come as fast as you can and..." she hesitates "And—you'll know when you see. You'll understand."

# 1. When It's Too Late

## Author's Note:

So this fandom pretty much took over my brain and then this fic was basically like, "yeahhh you're gonna write me." And then suddenly it was November and I was writing Harringrove fic for Nanowrimo. Yeah, I dunno. Fic is unbeta'ed.

Title from "Drive" by The Cars:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuZA6qiJVfU>

(The author recommends you listen for ALL the shipper feels)

January, 1985

The phone's ringing when Steve gets in the door. He doesn't run for it right away, taking the time to knock the snow off his boots at the threshold. It's been a long day of driving, ferrying the kids to Valparaíso and back for a D&D convention. That's Dungeons and Dragons, for the uninitiated, and Steve is now officially very, very initiated. So initiated, in fact, that the experience, plus the five pre-teens who had been squeezed into his car for hours, high on victory and SweetTarts, have sapped whatever energy he might have had to make a run for the phone. Anyway, that's what the new answering machine is for.

He hears the tinny, pre-recorded *"You've reached the Harrington residence, we're not able to come to the phone right now..."* start in the kitchen, but there's no response after the beep, just a busy signal. Dead line. Caller must've hung up. He shrugs. Just as well. He has a date tonight with the couch, and the remote, and some popcorn, and a movie—any movie really, so long as it's guaranteed to induce total mental oblivion (Steve's brain is really, really freaking tired okay)—and well, Steve's never stood up a date in his life. No sense in starting now.

His parents have a huge VHS collection—more than 100 movies in

total—and Steve’s been systematically working his way through all of them over the course of the last couple months.

He doesn’t sleep so great these days, is the thing. And his parents are traveling (again), and it’s not exactly like there’s anyone else to spend his nights with, these days. It’s a Saturday, so there’s probably at least two hopping parties in town, but Steve’s not much for parties either. These days.

That’s the thing—it’s like someone’s drawn a thick black line through his life, dividing it into two parts: Back Then and These Days. Back Then was overrated, full of facades and falsehoods. He knows that now, he gets it. And These Days are full of truth, but even emptier because of it. It’s a thing Steve doesn’t like to think about if he doesn’t have to. So he spends a lot of time distracting himself, mostly with the care and feeding of preteens. And movies. And target practice. Lots of target practice.

He’s fine. He’s fine. Steve just...didn’t think his life would turn out like this, is all.

He mentally shakes himself. *Snap out of it, Harrington*. So: movie. Revenge of the Nerds, he thinks. Seems appropriate, especially today. His butt has just made contact with the sofa and he’s on the verge of making consecutive movie night #48 a reality, when the phone rings again, too close to the last missed call to be anything but the same person calling back. Steve rolls his eyes, simultaneously fond and annoyed, mentally betting with himself which kid left something in his car. Smart money is on....

“Dustin, whatever it is, can it wait until tomorrow? It’s freezing out, and I’m not driving back across town because you left your twelve-sided dice or whatever in my c—”

“Steve?” The voice is quavery with fear, and familiar, but not immediately so. Too high-pitched to be Dustin or one of the other boys, whose voices have all started to drop into the lower registers of puberty.

“Max?” He asks. “Is that you?”

“Steve,” she says again, with more urgency, and now he’s sure it’s Max. “I need your help.”

Steve’s pulse goes into overdrive. “Max, what’s wrong? I can get Hopper—”

“No!” she cuts him off, talking fast. “No cops! There’s no time and, and...it’s so cold out there and—and there’s just no time okay? *Please*, you have to trust me. You know the road I live on? I need you to come here now, but DO NOT stop at the house, just keep driving past it, but come as fast as you can and...” she hesitates, “And...you’ll know when you see. You’ll understand.”

There’s background noise, someone else talking, and Max responds, the sounds muffled by something, a palm over the speaker maybe. When she comes back, her voice is even more frantic. “I have to go, just. *Please. Hurry.*” The line goes dead.

Steve doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t even hang up, just drops the receiver and bolts, reflexes honed by a year of living with paranoia and the paranormal. He’s back behind the wheel of the car and making for Max’s before he can even begin to question the wisdom of not calling Hopper for backup. It’s just as well. Experience has taught him that if this has anything to do with the strangeness that calls Hawkins home, he and Jim Hopper will end up on the same path anyway. Still, Steve sends up a prayer to a God he’s not sure believes in that this isn’t paranormal. *Please, just no monsters from another world.*

What he finds on Max’s street will make him think maybe otherworldly creatures wouldn’t have been so bad after all.

He coasts once he turns down her road, driving slow for the better part of a mile, but he doesn’t see a thing out of the ordinary. Visibility is shit—there’s no moon out, and the falling snow obscures what little advantage the headlights give. He’s contemplating stopping to find a pay phone and calling the Chief anyway when he sees it. Or, rather, sees *him*.

Billy Hargrove.

Visibility might be shit, but that blond mullet is unmistakable. The

jackass is about a hundred feet ahead, walking (stumbling) down the side of the road like it isn't the middle of the night, and there isn't a snow storm on. He's hunched over against the cold, arms wrapped tightly around himself. The idiot isn't even wearing a jacket.

"Dammit Max," Steve mutters. He takes his foot completely off the gas. He did *not* ask to get roped into wrangling Billy Hargrove. The guy pretty much tried to kill him back in November. Steve's nose just stopped being sore a couple weeks ago, and now Steve's supposed to...what? Just pull over and offer him a ride? No. Fat chance. Fuck that. He loves the nerds, but he did not sign up for this. He steps on the gas.

He's not even going to look at him, not going to make eye contact when he drives by, but...Billy Hargrove is a one-man trainwreck and, like any good rubber-necker, Steve's eyes are drawn to him as he rolls by. He's staggering, barely able to keep his feet in the powdery, fresh-fallen snow.

Steve swears. The guy's drunk. Unbelievable.

*Look away, Steve. Look. Away.* He tells himself this, knowing this whole thing can only bring trouble, but then, as if he can scent Steve's indecision, Billy turns his head and meets Steve's eyes. Spits.

"Shit."

By then Steve's rolled past him, but he can't unsee it—Billy's messed up face, the bloody glob he spits into the snow.

He's not going to stop. He's *not*. He's going to go home, put on his cozy flannel PJs (that absolutely no one has, nor ever will see), turn the heat up, pop the popcorn and watch *Revenge of the Nerds*. Or *Risky Business*. Or *Sixteen Candles*. (Yeah, he likes *Sixteen Candles*, so what?). Or anything that will make him forget the sight of this disaster of a human being, bleeding and shivering in the snow, because the thing is, Steve would rather go home and prune his nose hairs than stop in the cold for Billy freakin' Hargrove. Except.

He doesn't have a coat on. *It's so cold out there*, Max had said. *You'll know when you see.*

And there was so much blood on his face. (Probably not any more than Hargrove had beaten out of Steve's face that night in the Byers household though). And that settles it. SCREW that guy. He is not stopping. He's NOT.

He glances one last time into the rearview mirror, just in time to see Billy go down.

And Steve pulls over.

Billy's on his hands and knees in the snow with his head down, breathing heavy. But Steve knows from experience that just because Billy Hargrove is down does not mean he's out, so he still approaches with caution. His face might have healed but the bridge of his nose still gives a ghostly throb at the sight of this guy up close.

Steve expects to be met with derision and mockery. A mean smile and meaner words. But Billy's not smiling now, not that Steve can tell anyway. He hasn't even lifted his head. Still, between the tight line of his neck and the way his shoulders go stiff, it's obvious he's aware of Steve's approach.

Without looking up, he says, "Fuck off, Harrington."

"Well gee, that would be great, I'd love to, seeing as it's *twenty-two degrees out here*. But you're on the side of the road, in the dark, with no coat, in a snowstorm, BLEEDING, and there's a little girl who will be very upset with me if they find your dead body here in the morning, frozen in the snow, because I didn't help. And this town's seen enough dead bodies recently, and I'd probably lose some sleep, a little bit at least, even for a piece of shit asshole like you, and seriously, why do you gotta pick a fight with everyone you come across man and—oh. Oh shit. Don't do that."

Because Billy Hargrove starts—*fuck*—he starts to cry. He slumps over, sinking to his forearms in the snow, hiding his face in the crook of both elbows and curving his hands protectively over the back of his skull. His shoulders shake with each hitch of his breath, barely audible, but apart from that he's completely silent. The image is desperate and sad and aching young and doesn't fit the image he has in his head of Billy *at all*. It's unsettling, and it's uncomfortable to

watch, and it makes Steve want to look away, and maybe run away, and just...forget this whole thing is happening. But he can't. Shit.

How does this shit always happen to Steve?

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. Crouches down in front of the other boy. Thinks about resting a hand on his shoulder, but decides against it. Tries to sound like less of a jerk this time when he says, "Look...is there somewhere I can take you? Home?" Then he remembers what Max said—*DO NOT stop at the house*—and amends hastily, "...or somewhere else you can stay for the night?"

Billy makes a harsh, ugly sound that could just as easily be a sob or a mirthless laugh. He puts a palm down, pushes up out of the snow, and lifts his head to look Steve in the face. Everything about the motion looks painful, and when he meets Steve's eyes, Steve knows why. Someone has *demolished* this guy. His whole face is going to be a mass of bruises tomorrow. There's an ugly cut bisecting one eyebrow. His cheek and jaw are scraped badly on the right side and the skin around his right eye is puffy and dark. His nose is bleeding, and the blood on his teeth could be from the nose or the split lip or more cuts inside his mouth; it's impossible to tell. And that's just the face. There's no telling what kinds of injuries he's hiding underneath his clothes. He's hurting badly right now, and Steve knows from personal experience, he's only going to hurt worse tomorrow.

Someone finally gave Billy a taste of his own medicine. But the sight doesn't give Steve any satisfaction.

"Shit," he says. At a loss. "Do...do you need me to take you to the hospital?"

"Just fucking leave me here, Harrington," he rasps, eyes glassy but defiant.

"There must be somewhere—" Steve starts, but Billy cuts him off. "There isn't."

Steve says "Not even..." but he lets the words trail off. He'd almost said *Not even Tommy?* But he knows better. He used to be friends with the guy, he knows how he is. So no. Definitely not Tommy.



Dammit.

And in this moment, Steve is so. Fucking. Tired. He doesn't want to be here, dealing with this. Dealing with *him*. Billy is an asshole. He might even be a monster. But if Steve leaves him here, hurt and bleeding, in the snow, it'll mean Steve is an even bigger monster.

He makes a decision then, on pure instinct, and it's probably a really fucking dumb one. So be it. Wouldn't be the first time.

...And that's how he ends up bundling his arch enemy into the passenger seat of his Beemer and taking him home with him.

It's not easy, getting Hargrove into the car. Steve doesn't ask permission, doesn't tell him where they're going, just squares his shoulders and says, "Okay." Then he moves to crouch beside the other boy so he can take his arm and throw it over his own shoulder, and then quickly, before Billy can protest, he says "Alright, we're getting you up. Ready? On three: one...two...THREE!" and with no more warning than that, levers the other boy to his feet.

Billy lets out a sharp noise of pain when they rise, just barely keeping his feet. His body falls heavy against Steve's and the two of them stumble together, Steve doing some quick shuffling to keep them both from going down. *How's that for planting my feet, jackass?*

"Okay, let's just get you to the car," Steve grunts, as much for his own benefit as Billy's. He's already out of breath (Hargrove is freaking *solid*) and the distance between the two of them and the car seems to grow with every step. It doesn't help that he's taking the majority of Billy's weight, half-carrying the other guy. Billy is still bent over, clutching at his lower belly with his free hand, a hand that's covered in blood, Steve sees, and for a minute he worries that the other guy has been stabbed or something. Without thinking, he drops his hand down and presses it against the flat of the other boy's stomach to feel around for a wound, knocking Hargrove's own hand out of the way. The muscles are clenched tight underneath Steve's hand, like he's bracing himself, but there's no blood, no open wound, and Steve snatches his hand back, embarrassed. But Billy doesn't say anything.

He doesn't say anything once they're in the car and moving either, not even to ask where they're going. Steve doesn't have anything to offer, and uncomfortable silence hangs heavy and tangible between them. Then the deer steps out in front of the car.

It comes out of nowhere, just there all of a sudden in the middle of the road. Steve practically stands on the brakes to keep from hitting the animal. They don't. Hit it, that is, but the car fishtails wildly, and both are then thrown forward *hard*. Billy's not wearing a seatbelt, and he has to use both hands to stop his body from slamming into the dashboard. He cries out, a broken, pained noise and groans again when the car finally slides to a stop, leaning forward and cupping his crotch with both hands and *ohhhh*. It all makes sense now. The lack of color in his lips, the way he couldn't stand up straight, the way he could barely hold his feet to walk to the car. He's not in pain from a stomach injury—he's in pain because someone's nailed him in the groin.

"*Jesus, Harrington,*" he moans, voice cracking. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Sorry! Sorry!" And Steve is. Really, he is.

It's a not a long drive, from Billy's street to Steve's house, but Steve takes it slow now, trying his best to avoid the worst of the bumps in the road. Because Billy might have deserved to get his ass kicked, but Steve wouldn't wish a groin injury on (literally, in this case) his worst enemy.

Billy's so tense his shoulders are practically around his ears. He's shivering, and Steve can't tell if it's from the pain or the cold but he can see the gooseflesh pebbling Billy's skin from here, so he turns the heat up as high as it'll go.

"Just...hold on," he says, and wonders, for the first of what will be many times, what the hell he's going to do with Billy Hargrove.

## **2. Things Aren't So Great**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

Harrington brings Billy home with him like a fucking stray dog. Drags him inside and dumps him on the ridiculously overpriced couch in his ridiculously upscale living room, and then tears out of the room like he's got hell on his heels, mumbling something about first aid kits. And Billy, he doesn't say a thing. His insides writhe with self-loathing and a humiliation so deep he feels it in his bones.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

TW: mentions of throwing up/gagging, groin injuries described in moderate detail, mild suicidal ideation.

This fic is very un-beta'ed, my dudes.

Harrington brings Billy home with him like a fucking stray dog. Drags him inside and dumps him on the ridiculously overpriced couch in his ridiculously upscale living room, and then tears out of the room like he's got hell on his heels, mumbling something about first aid kits. And Billy, he doesn't say a thing. His insides writhe with self-loathing and a humiliation so deep he feels it in his bones.

Christ, he hurts. It alternates between a sick throb low in his belly and sharp searing heat in his balls, and it's the worst fucking thing he's ever felt. He closes his eyes and curls into the couch, presses his face into the cushions and tries to ride it out, trying not to think about how it happened. He's cried once tonight already—fucking sobbed, right there in the snow on his knees in front of Steve Harrington, and the memory makes him burn with shame, makes him want to eat a bullet—and there's no way he's going to let himself cry like a little pussy again. But he can't keep out the memories from earlier tonight that rise up inside his head and try to eat him alive.

Since they'd moved to Bumfuck, Indiana, his dad had been quicker to anger, even more so than usual. Neil's always been *generous* with his fists, but he's worse now, ready to read every action as proof of Billy's lack of respect, as an indicator of his supposed irresponsibility.

Billy's been on his best behavior, taking extra pains to avoid pissing him off. He keeps his trap shut, not talking back. Doesn't help. He fucking chauffeurs Max around with little complaint (at least to Neil's face). Doesn't help. He picks up after himself, doing his best to leave no sign of himself anywhere in the house (other than his own room). Doesn't help. Nothing helps.

He's started picking up extra shifts at Gordo's, the garage he'd gotten hired at just outside of town. The pay is shit, but it doesn't matter. It's money and it's his and it's gonna get him out of here one day. He's just gotta make it through the rest of this year, walk across that stage and get his fucking diploma, see the other side of eighteen, then he's *gone*. He's just gotta keep his head down until then.

But he should have known. Keeping your head down never helped anyone. Sure as shit ain't gonna help Billy.

"You're fucking *insane*." The words had tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop them. But he couldn't help it. Billy's fuse has been running short for a long time anyway—he spends most of his time feeling jittery and restless and pissed, like his skin's too tight and he's going to split at the seams any minute. And then tonight Neil had all but kicked the door down, barging into his room to accuse Billy of stealing money that had *supposedly* gone missing from his wallet. He'd lost his goddamn mind. It's never taken much to set Neil off anyway, but now he's full-on making shit up. Billy might be a lot of things, but a thief isn't one of them. And even if he ever thought about it, he knows better than to try stealing from his father. He's not that dumb.

But apparently he is, because he'd just talked back to Neil Hargrove, cursed him to his face even. His father had given him that familiar look of high-handed disappointment, almost mocking in its intensity, like he was trying to keep the corners of his mouth from twitching up with the satisfaction of being proven right: that yes, his useless son is indeed a piece of shit. Billy had known that look for what it was—a

signal that he was about to be in for a whole world of hurt.

That was nothing new though. Billy had learned a long time ago how to take a beating. How to clench his jaw and tighten his abdominals to mitigate the damage from a blow. How to roll with a punch, and when to take a convincing dive. And he's long since mastered the art of going away in his own head, stepping back and letting his body go on autopilot until it was over.

But Neil's on a rampage tonight, ready to tear through every defense Billy's ever erected, and it goes on a long time. And it's bad. Black eyes and bruised ribs and blood in his mouth bad.

But Neil had made one mistake, in his anger. He'd forgotten to close the door behind him.

It had been Max, in the end, that saved him. Billy hadn't seen her come in and neither had Neil, apparently. She'd shrieked, "Neil, *stop!* You're killing him!" And when her voice, high and pleading, had broken through the sound of fists on flesh, they'd both frozen like that—Neil with his fist cocked back, ready to throw another jaw-ringing blow, and Billy, half-crouched, his arms covering his head.

His father had taken a break from beating the shit out of his own son to turn and utter a stern, cold warning. "This doesn't concern you, Maxine. Go back to your room. *Now.*"

Billy could hear the threat underlying his words. He'd looked up to see Max's stricken, tear-streaked face, to see Susan wavering in the doorway behind her daughter, trying to pull Max from the room without actually entering herself. He'd seen by the look on Susan's face that not only had she heard, she'd *understood*, even if Max didn't. And he'd wondered if she regretted marrying into his shitty excuse of a family yet. If she'd leave soon. If he'd get blamed for it when she did. Wondered how much hurt he'd be in for when the time came.

Maybe Billy should have been grateful to Max for trying, inexplicably, to defend him. Or maybe he should have been grateful for the brief reprieve she'd given him, time to gather himself before the next blow fell. But it all just made him hate her more—her and her fucking mother, too.

Because *WHY*? Why should he be grateful? Because they're here to witness his humiliation while Neil beats him down like a *dog*? Because Susan is stupid enough to be married to his father in the first place? Because she's trying to protect Max now, when she'd known—probably—what Neil was all along? When she'd never lifted one fucking finger to help HIM? Because Max lives in a world where she can stand up to Neil and face no consequences while Billy lives in another world entirely? *NO*. Fuck that. Anger had poured through him, burning, swelling up inside, pressing at the seams.

Because Max was wrong. His dad wasn't going to kill him tonight. He was just going to *break* him. He was going to hurt him until Billy begged him to stop, and then he was going to hurt him some more, until he was satisfied that there was nothing left of Billy except a weak, cowardly little bitch who would never, ever open his mouth in *disrespect* again, who'd spend the rest of his life flinching at the sight of any man who bore even the slightest resemblance to Neil Hargrove. In the brief pause created by Max's distraction, Billy could see it, the emptiness stretching out in front of him, turning into decades, a lifetime. It wouldn't end when he got out. It'd never end.

That was why he had done it. Max had provided the perfect distraction, and Neil was looking the other way, and Billy hadn't even thought, just acted, when he'd thrown that punch, cold-clocking his own father across the jaw, putting all his weight behind it. *Fuck you*, he'd thought.

And so Billy definitely *WAS* that dumb after all. Because he'd been in enough fights to know when he was outclassed, and against his own father, even with the hardest sucker punch Billy could throw, he'd never stood a chance. Neil's got two inches and twenty-five pounds on him, and the former Marine has, to the best of Billy's knowledge, never lost a fight.

Everything had screeched to a halt then. Max had sucked in a horrified breath and Susan had used the moment to yank her out of the room. Billy could only watch as Neil placed a thumb to the inside of his cheek, inspecting the blood he'd found there. He'd worked his jaw back and forth experimentally, then lifted dangerously narrowed eyes to meet Billy's own. And Billy had known

he was fucked.

The body blows had come hard and fast then, too fast to block, too hard to resist, and then Billy was on the ground and gasping, hurting. And that was where it usually ended, when Billy couldn't stand (or, after he wised up in his later teens, when he'd learned to *pretend* he couldn't stand), but this time Neil had saved the best for last, and maybe he'd been aiming for a kick to the gut and missed, but Billy somehow doubts it and either way, it results in a pain like Billy's never felt before, a pain that short circuits his body—like someone had threaded barbed wire through his balls and then dragged it right up through his gut.

And then it was over, and Billy had lain there and writhed and mewled and tried to remember how to breathe and thought he might die. At some point, he'd opened his eyes and realized with horror that it wasn't over after all, because Neil was still there, standing over him, regarding him calmly. Coldly.

"If you try that again, I will end you," he'd said. "Do you understand me?"

Billy nods.

Neil bends over a little, turns his head and gestures at his ear. "What's that?"

"Yes....s-sir. I....u-understand you. *Sir*." Those miserable words had felt like goddamn ashes in his mouth. Saying them was like another punch to the gut.

"What else?" God, would it never be ENOUGH? He'd clamped down on a sob.

"I'm s—" He couldn't. He couldn't. He had to. He'd started again. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Yes, you are. But not as sorry as you will be, if that money isn't back in my wallet by *tomorrow*. Do you understand?"

One last time. He could do this. "Yes sir, I understand." And then it was over and he was alone. He'd lain there, and thought of never

getting up again.

*Get up.* His balls and belly ached fiercely. He could barely breathe. He'd thought he might be sick. *Get up.* He couldn't replace money he didn't have, that he'd never taken in the first place. *Get. Up.* And he'd known then. He couldn't stay in this house another minute.

It was a fight to get to his feet, and once he was upright, he wasn't sure he'd be able to stay that way. *Get out.* His knees shook and his vision wobbled at the edges and he could hear the sobbing sounds of his breath echoing in his head. *Get out.* He'd gone for his car keys. But they were gone. And then he'd realized—Neil had anticipated him and taken them when he'd left. Panic had howled through him, searing and terrible, and he'd sobbed desperately. He couldn't stay here. He couldn't *do* this anymore, he couldn't— *Get out! Get OUT! Getoutgetoutogetout!*

And then he was scrambling, limping, breaking for the door, and he was outside, and stumbling, and it was bitter cold, and he *hurt*, and it didn't matter. He was never going back, even if he died out here. So what if he did? Maybe he should.

So he'd walked. And he'd walked. And he'd walked, losing all track of time. There was snow everywhere, and the world had gone quiet, almost peaceful, and all he could hear was the sound of his own pounding heart and he'd just kept walking.

And then there were headlights, and he was on his knees, and there were footsteps, and then Steve *fucking* Harrington was there.

"Fuck off, Harrington," he'd said.

But Steve Harrington did not fuck off.

And for just a split second, Billy had felt something like relief.

Stupid.

Now here he is. In Steve Harrington's fucking house, on Steve Harrington's fucking couch. Lying here while his nuts and his gut and his head all fucking throb, with Harrington nowhere to be found, and this is his fucking life. He presses his face harder into the suede couch



cushion beneath him, clenches his eyes against the throb.

He must lose time, because then Harrington is there; Billy can hear him breathing somewhere close by, but he doesn't remember hearing him coming back in. He opens his eyes and sees the other boy sitting opposite him on a coffee table that he's pulled closer to the couch, elbows resting on his knees, silently watching.

He opens his mouth, means to ask Harrington if he's enjoying the fucking view, but what comes out instead is, "I think I'm going to puke."

"No, you're not," Harrington informs him calmly, but he must not be as sure as he sounds, because he pushes a wastebasket up to the couch to sit by Billy's head.

He's right though. Billy doesn't throw up, but he does dry heave over the basket for a solid minute. He realizes, somewhere in the middle, that there's a firm hand on his shoulder, holding him there so he doesn't go rolling off the couch. When he finally stops gagging, he leans back, rolling his shoulder to shrug Harrington's hand off.

"Fuck y—" he starts, but is interrupted by one last gag.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, fuck me," the other boy says evenly, and passes him a glass of water. "Now take a couple sips of this, and keep breathing though your nose, slow and deep," he instructs. "The urge to ralph will pass. If you can keep the water down for a minute, you can have one of these." He rattles an orange prescription bottle. "Percocet," he clarifies, at Billy's questioning look.

Billy clears his throat, tries to focus on keeping the water down. He wants that pill. "Look at you, Harrington," he says, hoping the other boy doesn't notice the way his voice wobbles. "Holding on to the good stuff."

"It's uh, from when I had my wisdom teeth out over the summer," Harrington clarifies. Like Billy gives a shit. But he doesn't say so. Doesn't say anything that might keep Harrington from giving him the goddamn pill, and when he holds his hand out expectantly, he gets what he wants.

He'd blame what happens next on a Percocet-induced hallucination, except he's only just swallowed the pill, and it hasn't even had time to reach his stomach yet.

"Take off your pants," Harrington says.

Billy feels his eyes go wide, then narrow. "The fuck did you just say to me?"

Harrington winces, shakes his head a little and looks away. When he looks back, his cheeks have gone pink. "That, uh, that came out wrong," he says, and holds up what looks like a fabric pouch with a plastic cap on top. "Ice pack. For your, um..." he gestures vaguely downward. "But it won't work very well through uh, through your jeans."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"I'm really not," Harrington replies. "Trust me, it'll help."

"I always knew you wanted to get my pants off, you big fucking queen," Billy sneers.

Harrington's cheeks go from pink to bright red. He shakes his head vigorously, and Billy doesn't think he's ever seen another human being actually grinding their teeth before.

"Why do you gotta be such a fucking—" Harrington gestures spasmodically in a way Billy takes to mean "heinous asshole." He stands abruptly. "You know what? Fine." He drops the ice pack onto Billy's stomach. "Ice pack." He rips down a throw blanket spread across the back of the couch and lets it drop haphazardly onto Billy's body. "Blanket." And then he steps back from the couch, hands in the air. "I'm done. Take care of it on your own." He goes to walk out of the room, then stops. Turns on his heel. Comes about halfway back, says, "You think I want to be here? Playing nursemaid to the jerk who tried to kill me? Screw you." Then he turns to leave again.

*No, please.* Billy can't say the words. He's never been able to bring himself to beg. But he needs....he needs to not be alone right now. *Please, God.* Quickly, before Harrington can leave, he blurts, "Wait.

How'd you know?"

Harrington turns back. Blows out an exasperated breath. Rolls his eyes. "How did I know you'd taken a shot to the 'nads? Well it was pretty obv—"

"No, not that. How'd you know what to do? How'd you know I wasn't actually going to upchuck?"

"Oh. Well, 'cause the same thing happened to me, freshman year."

Billy frowns, not sure he believes him. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he answers, moving closer. The furrow between his eyebrows starts to soften. "It was at a JV basketball game. State semi-finals. I was under the basket, jumped up to get the rebound, another guy went up at the same time, didn't get as high, ax-handled me right in the crotch. It was the worst thing I've ever felt. Like the whole world was ending. And the worst part is, for that first split second after it happens, you don't even feel anything, but you know it's coming, and then BOOM. It's like your balls have exploded backwards up into your own body, and it hurts SO BAD, and you feel like you wanna puke and scream and cry all at the same time but all you can do is curl up and try to breathe and hope you haven't crapped your pants."

"Fuckin' A," Billy agrees. That's *exactly* what it feels like.

"Yeah, you think that's bad?" Harrington asks. "Try having the whole thing happen in front of your mom, who then insists she has to drive you to the doctor, and accompany you into the exam room, and stay there for every single excruciating moment of the exam."

Billy doesn't think having someone who cares so much sounds that bad, but Harrington seems to have forgotten he was mad at him, and he doesn't want to make him run off again. So he replies, "Hope your teammates kicked the other team's ass for that shit."

Harrington runs a hand through his ridiculous hair. "Yeah, it wasn't the other team. It was your good pal Tommy H." He huffs out a laugh and drops back down to sit on the edge of the coffee table again. "I'd

been putting up a lot of points that night, and he hadn't. He said it was an accident. I'm almost forty percent sure I believe him."

Billy chuckles. He can't help it. Maybe it's the Percocet working already, because even though Harrington is telling a story about getting nailed in the balls, Billy had almost forgotten about the pain in his own....until his laughter jostles sore muscles, setting his belly and balls on fire again. His chuckle turns to a wheeze as he curls back onto his side, cupping both hands protectively between his legs. "*Fuck Harrington, don't make me laugh.*"

"Ouch, sorry," Harrington says, sucking in a sympathetic breath. He leans down and picks up the icepack where it's rolled off onto the floor. He holds it up so Billy can see. "It's still cold. Do you wanna..." He kind of twitches his head sideways in the general direction of Billy's lower body.

At this point, Billy is willing to try anything. S'not like Harrington hasn't seem him in less when they're in the locker room together. It's just a good thing he decided to wear underwear beneath his jeans today. He hesitates, but then nods slowly. "Can...can you—" then clamps his jaw shut when he hears the stammer in his own voice, flinching, sick at what a little bitch he sounds like. The thought of Harrington helping him take his pants off, or even just standing there watching while Billy is laid so vulnerable, makes Billy's stomach cramp in ways that have nothing to do with any of the hits he's taken tonight.

"What do you need?" Harrington asks, concern warm in his dark eyes.

Billy rolls back onto his back, looking up at the ceiling so he doesn't have to see the sympathy on Harrington's face. It makes him want to punch something. Someone.

He's able to grit out, "I don't think I can bend over." And it's true. Just the thought of getting up makes him feel like puking again.

Harrington gets it immediately, moving to the end of the couch to help pull off Billy's boots. "Hey," he says. "Just...if you get things started up there, y'know just, unbutton and lift your hips, then I'll...

pull from down here, and we can...”

The humiliation had started to ebb when Harrington told his story earlier, but now it's back, burning hot in his face and chest, stronger than ever. Burning with the need to hit something (to *hurt* something), Billy warns, “I swear to God, Harrington, if you even look at my junk, I'll fucking kill you.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks to everyone who read and left kudos and kind comments on the last chapter. I'm a terrible perfectionist, which kills my writing pace, so thanks for being patient with me as I ground this one out. Hope you guys enjoy. More to come!

I'm LaVeraceVia over on tumblr as well! Come rap with me about All The (Stranger) Things!

As always, feedback is love! <3

### **3. When You Fall**

#### **Summary for the Chapter:**

So when Billy starts, “Can...can you-?” and then has to look anywhere but at Steve or his own body before he can mumble, “I don’t think I can bend over,” Steve thinks he’s got it. What he’s really saying is, “Please help me. I’m embarrassed. But don’t be fucking weird about it.”

So here goes nothing.

#### **Notes for the Chapter:**

TW: Character being held down, against his will, to keep him from hurting himself or someone else. Semi-consensual (read: consensual but stoned on pain meds) cuddling.

I...am not super fond of this chapter. It feels clunky and overly wordy, so my bad if any of that is glaringly obvious. But I’ve been sitting on this chapter for too long, and it was time to post it, 'cause it's not getting any prettier, so here it is. Fic is still, most emphatically, unbeta'ed.

After the chaos of last November, once his face had healed enough that he felt like showing it in public, Steve had gone out and bought an industrial-sized first aid kit. Seemed like a good idea at the time. He’s been in the bathroom for the last ten minutes on the pretense of retrieving that kit.

Wait. That is—he IS actually in the bathroom retrieving the first aid kit, okay? He’s just...he’s just kind of hiding at the same time. And maybe also having a mild mental breakdown.

The thing is...he has NO IDEA what to do about the problem at hand.

The problem named Billy Hargrove.

He *hates* the guy. Or he did. He does. He wants to. Whatever. He just can't reconcile the idea of the smirking maniac who stood over him and punched and punched and *punched* until the world went black, with the image of the bruised, broken boy lying curled on Steve's sofa right now. Something about seeing him like that, vulnerable and in pain, smaller somehow, makes Steve forget the maniac and see only the boy. And Steve doesn't want to forget the maniac.

Last November, after the smoke had cleared and he'd gotten the kids home safely, but before the excursion to buy supplies for that first aid kit, Steve had spent a week in bed: skipping school, hiding from the world, unable to explain what had happened to make his face look like that—lips and jaw puffy, nose swollen, eyes bloodshot, face a mass of bruises picked out in eggplant and shiny pink—and unwilling to show his face in public where people could *see*.

His parents were gone (as usual, big surprise) and no one had called or come by to make sure he was alright, and he'd been alone and sore and scared and so screwed up in the head. Until that third day, when the doorbell rang. And there was Dustin, carrying a thermos of his mom's chicken noodle soup and a bottle of aspirin and smiling that sunny Cabbage Patch Kid smile, and Steve had been so...so *relieved* to see another person, to be thought of by someone else, that he'd almost cried right there in front of the kid.

And Billy Hargrove was the one who'd done that to him. So no, he doesn't want to know Billy. Doesn't want to feel pity for him. Doesn't want to see him as anything but the monster that he is.

And so here Steve is, sitting on the bathroom floor and trying not to scream into the hand towel, while he listens to the sounds of pained breathing that echo down the hall from the den and tries to figure out what to do. He idly considers the possibility of never leaving the bathroom again.

Then he thinks again about Dustin, standing on his doorstep that chilly November morning, grinning, helpful and open-faced and sweet, as he held out the bag with the soup and the aspirin. And he thinks about how, in that one moment, almost everything wrong in

Steve's world had been put right, and....well, what else is there to do? Steve stands up and sighs.

Then, armed with nothing more than a waste basket and a first aid kit, he heads out to face the boy who used to be (who still is?) a monster.

Steve has steeled himself for a battle (of wills, at the very least) but it quickly becomes obvious that that won't be necessary. Billy hasn't moved from the spot where Steve deposited him earlier. He's still lying there, curled up on his side with his eyes squeezed shut. Beads of sweat dot his hairline and his upper lip, and his body is still wracked with shivers. He reeks of sweat and exertion and something else, something familiar and unpleasant in a way that Steve can't put his finger on.

Steve moves closer, staying just out of arm's reach. Billy's eyes are closed, but with the level of pain he must be in (Steve knows from unfortunate personal experience), there's no way he's actually asleep.

As if to prove him right, Billy opens hazy, pain-filled eyes to glare up at him. Then panic floods his face, replacing the suspicion there, and he gasps, "I think I'm gonna puke."

Everything happens in a rush after that—Billy dry-heaving over the waste basket, and cursing Steve, and dry-heaving some more—and in the chaos, Steve thinks, maybe he really can do this. He can stay neutral, business-like, just one guy helping another out, and everything will be fine. He can get through this.

Then Billy wobbles a little, clinging to the edge of the sofa as he gags miserably, and Steve doesn't even think about it, automatically reaching out to grab Billy's shoulder so he doesn't tumble head first off the couch.

When it's over, Billy pulls in a long, shaky breath and collapses back onto the sofa. He wraps both arms back around his middle and just lies there, curled loosely into the fetal position with his eyes squinched shut. He's not shaking anymore, but his skin is still pale, and there's still no color in his lips. He's the perfect picture of abject misery, and Steve wonders, full of an involuntary feeling that feels a



whole lot like pity, who did this to the guy.

A traitorous part of him itches to reach out and rub a comforting hand up and down Billy's back. Push back the sweaty hair that's stuck to his face. Tell him that he's going to be okay.

*Dammit.* This is what Steve had been afraid of.

Anxious to find a way to help that doesn't involve touching the other boy, Steve offers Billy the pain meds. Percocet always makes Steve a little loopy, but Billy takes them without hesitation.

And it's all going okay. Weird, but okay. Then Steve gets tongue-tied and that all goes to hell.

It's just a slip-up. Steve doesn't meant to say it like that, *take off your pants*, but he's never been the most eloquent guy, and he's nervous alright, and even though he tries to explain after the fact, Billy's eyes go flinty and mocking.

"I always knew you wanted to get my pants off, you big fucking queen," he sneers. *You big fucking queen.* The words clang around inside Steve's head, embarrassment filling his body. Even his ears feel hot.

He almost walks out then, so over this whole fucking night, so done with this asshole. So done with *everything*. But Billy calls after him. And there's something in his voice that makes Steve pause. He doesn't say the words—*wait, please, stay*. Steve hears them anyway. So he comes back. Settles back in, starts the process of trying to get Billy to let Steve help him all over again. It's like holding out food to a starving stray—*here boy, it's a cheeseburger!*—but the damn dog just keeps biting your hand instead.

He tries to commiserate with him, telling the story of his own mishap on the basketball court freshman year, sparing no detail. And as he does, he watches that wary thing behind Billy's eyes begin to soften, just a little. When Billy laughs, really *laughs*, Steve thinks he might actually be on the way to navigating Billy Hargrove's defenses. Thinks the two of them might just be able to get through this.

So when Billy starts, “Can...can you—?” and then has to look anywhere but at Steve or his own body before he can mumble, “I don’t think I can bend over,” Steve thinks he’s got it. What he’s really saying is, *Please help me. I’m embarrassed. But pretend you don’t see.*

So here goes nothing.

He starts with Billy’s shoes, because shoes are no big deal, right? Steve pulls off his heavy motorcycle boots with minimum difficulty, lets each shoe *clunk* to the floor. And then he plays the next part very, very carefully. Because the jeans have to come off, to get the ice pack on. And no matter how you slice it, this is about to get awkward. *More* awkward. Extra awkward with a side of awkward. (And really, why did he think this was a good idea?)

“Hey,” he says, speaking slow, in what he hopes is a soothing tone. “Just...if you get things started up there, y’know just, unbutton and lift your hips, then I’ll...pull from down here, and we can...”

So of course Billy cuts him off with, “I swear to God, Harrington, if you even look at my junk, I’ll kill you.”

This fucking guy. Does he *really* think Steve wants...? Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. “Yeah. Yeah man, that’s it. That’s why I went to all this trouble. I’m not trying to actually help you or anything, I was just hoping to *look at your junk.*”

Billy turns that blue flame glare on Steve, full force. “Well, you look like you mighta seen one up close before, s’all I’m saying.”

Seriously, *why* does this shit always happen to Steve?

He feels the anger rising in his throat again. “What the hell is it you want from me, Hargrove?”

Billy pushes up onto his elbows. “I don’t want *shit* from you Harrington, haven’t I made that clear?”

“That’s not—what do you want me to say man? What would keep you from being such a dick all the time? I’m here, I’m trying to help, and you just keep pushing. From the very first moment I met you—”

“Oh *yeah*, Saint Steve. Such an angel, helping some asshole gutter trash, out of the goodness of his heart.”

“I never said—”

“You wanna know? You really wanna know? *Nothing*. Nothing will make me be nice to you,” Billy hisses through clenched teeth. “Nothing will make me trust you. Nothing will make me believe you’re full of anything other than *bullshit*, pretty boy.”

*Bullshit*. Of all the fucking words, it has to be that one that comes out of Billy Hargrove’s mouth. It makes Steve’s blood boil. Which is the only excuse he has for what comes out of his mouth next.

Deliberately, he marches back around to stand by the side of the couch, leans down a little so he can say it in the other guy’s face. “So, who was it, Billy? Who did this to you?”

“Why do the fuck do you care, Harrington?”

“Maybe...” *Don’t say it, Steve*. “Maybe I want a name so I can buy them a beer,” it’s Steve’s turn to sneer.

That familiar crazy edge flares back to life in Billy’s eyes. “Yeah? That’s *great*,” he spits. “I’m sure my old man would appreciate that. The two of you can commiserate over how much you fucking hate me. Raise a glass to what a piece of shit I am.”

Billy says more, a profanity-laced tirade spilling from his lips, but Steve stops listening after he hears “my old man.” Everything inside Steve goes into free fall. Is it possible to experience regret so immediate and strong that it causes you actual physical pain? According to his twisting stomach, the answer is *Yes*.

“W-why would your dad...why would he...?” Steve shakes his head, moves back out of Billy’s air. He doesn’t have the right words. He doesn’t think the right words exist.

“Take your pick,” Billy spits. “‘Cause he hates me. ‘Cause he likes the way his fists feel against my face. ‘Cause he thinks I’m a FAG. Or, hey, this time, **THIS TIME** it was because I supposedly took money out of his wallet. Except I didn’t touch his fucking money. ‘Cause I’m

not a thief!" He turns his face away from Steve as the corners of his mouth start to wobble.

What is there to say? *I'm sorry your dad's an abusive jackass who probably turned you into an abusive jackass?* Yeah, no. Not helpful. What would be helpful, exactly? Not a lot. At least, not anything that Steve can do. Except.

"Billy, I...I am so sorry man. I shouldn't have said that." He puts a hand on Billy's shoulder, squeezes just a little, trying to communicate with a touch how sorry he is, but Billy throws his hand off.

He sits up, puts his finger in Steve's face. His eyes are angry and wet, dark lashes gone spidery with tears. "Do *not* fucking touch me, Harrington!"

Steve puts his hands up in surrender. "Okay. I'm sorry, okay? I get it —"

Billy shoves him back violently. "You don't get shit!" Steve goes over awkwardly, coming up hard with one hip against the too-close coffee table, just able to catch himself with one hand on the flat surface so he doesn't go sprawling.

"Don't do that," he warns, straightening, but either Billy's beyond hearing, or he just doesn't care, because he strikes out at Steve with a wild punch. Steve dodges and Billy's fist glances harmlessly off his shoulder, but he's already winding back again, and okay, this is NOT happening. Steve might have fucked up, but he's not about to play punching bag to this guy for a second time.

He goes for Billy, grabbing at his arms, not trying to fight him, just trying to restrain. "Stop it!" he barks.

The other guy is weakened by his injuries and exhaustion, but he's still plenty strong, and it's hard to subdue him. They grapple unsuccessfully, each able to grip the other's arms and do little else. Until it occurs to Steve to move behind Billy for better leverage. He moves quickly, getting a knee in the couch, right behind Billy's tailbone, and wrapping his arms around him so he's locked in a bear-hug. Billy lets out a roar of rage when Steve forces him to cross his

arms over his chest, but Steve's got the upper hand now, and no matter how Billy twists, he can't get free. But STILL he doesn't stop fighting. He's caught in the throes of something now, out of control. Lost.

"Billy, stop! STOP! You're going to hurt yourself!" He speaks close to the other boy's ear, nearly getting his nose bashed in for his troubles when Billy tries to reverse head-butt him. *Alright, that's it.* Steve throws their combined weight sideways, turning their bodies so Billy's pressed face-first into the back of the couch, almost fully immobilized. Billy continues to buck and thrash, growling wordlessly, but Steve just holds him there, pressing the full weight of his body against him, and eventually, *finally*, Billy runs out of steam.

Billy turns his face to the side, cheek pressed against the suede, to suck in big, heaving gasps, and Steve presses his own forehead to the other boy's temple to hold him still, in case this is just a ploy to try his little head-butting trick again. "Easy, easy," he murmurs into his ear, "Let it go." Billy doesn't move, but his whole body vibrates underneath Steve like an engine idling at a stoplight.

Steve lifts his head and takes a deep breath of his own, trying to stave off his own fatigue, determined to wait him out. Pressed so close like this, their bodies touching from shoulders to knees, Steve can't help but once again inhale Billy's scent. He smells of the same things from earlier in the evening—sweat and exhaustion and that strange familiar note Steve couldn't place before. Suddenly it hits him. Steve recognizes that scent for what it is—*fear*.

Human fear has a very distinct smell—musky and bitter at the same time, sharp in the nose—and it's one that Steve is well acquainted with. It's a scent that takes him back to the close press of bodies on a derelict school bus, to the sight of monsters with faces from Hell, to the feel of otherworldly vines squelching under his feet in darkened tunnels. He can't believe he didn't recognize it earlier. And now, he realizes, Billy's smelled that way all night. *Shit*.

"Easy," Steve whispers, one last time. He lets out a shaky breath. "I'm...I'm so sorry I said what I said. I'm so sorry for what happened to you. And it's okay—you don't have to trust me. But you can, if you want to. I'm not going to hurt you. You don't even have to stay here

if you don't want to. I have a friend who's a cop, I can call him and he can come and take you—"

"No, no cops," Billy pants out around a throat full of gravel.

"He's a good guy, I swear, and he can take you somewhere safe."

"No cops," Billy repeats. Steve can hear the plea in his voice.

"Okay, no cops," Steve echoes. "I'm going to let you go now. Please don't try to hit me." He feels more than sees Billy nod his head, and he takes that to (hopefully) mean *okay I won't* and not *just you wait*.

Billy doesn't even move when Steve releases his arms.

"Okay," Steve says again. "I'm going to leave you alone now. You can sleep here. Bathroom's down the hall. We'll...we'll figure out the rest in the morning." But even as he says it, Billy's body is softening against his, sagging bonelessly between him and the couch. "Billy," he says. There's no response, and Steve gets a little scared then. He pulls Billy back against his own body again, jiggling him a little. "Billy?"

"You break it, you bought it," the other boy mumbles.

"Billy..." Steve says, at a loss.

"I'm s'posed to trust you. Isn't that what you said?" Billy's body shakes once with what might be a silent sob.

*Well, shit.* "Yeah...that's what I said," Steve answers, making a decision. "I've got you." He moves back carefully, keeping an arm around Billy, situating him firmly in the vee of Steve's legs, so they're sprawled together along the length of the couch. Billy reclines back against Steve's chest like it's nothing, like they hadn't almost come to blows a few minutes ago, like Billy hadn't spent the better part of the night slinging accusations and insults over far less than the touch they're sharing now. Must be the Percocet finally kicking in.

Billy presses his palms over his eyes, "Everything is so fucked up right now, Harrington. What am I gonna do?"

And Steve doesn't know. "We'll figure it out in the morning," he says.

Later, Billy will say (slur, really), "Hey, check it out, Harrington. Everything's still in one piece." And Steve will look down as directed, to see Billy thumbing the band of his briefs away from his waist, casually inspecting the goods. Steve will catch the glint of dark gold pubic hair before he glances away sharply, and he'll think to himself, *yup, Percocet's kicked in.*

Later, Steve will carefully slip out from behind Billy. He'll find the first aid kit and finally put it to use. He'll clean the blood off of Billy's face and spread antibiotic ointment over all his cuts and smooth a butterfly bandage over the split that runs through his eyebrow. He'll refill the now-melted ice pack and lift Billy's shirt and place it on the bruise purpling his ribs. He'll flinch in sympathy when Billy hisses in semi-conscious pain, his abdominal muscles going concave at the cold. He'll finally push that sweaty hair out of Billy's face. Billy won't notice because he's already (*finally*) fallen asleep. Steve will cover him with a blanket and take up residence in the recliner with a blanket of his own, because Billy hadn't wanted him to leave there at the end, and Steve won't know if that only applied until he fell asleep or not, but he'll decide not to chance it, just in case.

Later, he'll reach for his anger, just to see what's left, and realize that it's all but gone, slipped away while Steve wasn't looking. Steve will find he won't miss it (mostly).

But right now, he'll tuck his hands under his thighs, unsure what else to do with them, and lie there while Billy Hargrove uses him as his own personal recliner. He'll inhale deeply, gratefully, and smell nothing but the scent of clean sweat and teenage boy.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks to everyone who read and left kudos/comments! It means more than I can say. Your words make my day every time.

As always, love is feedback, feedback is love! <3

I'm LaVeraceVia on Tumblr as well. See you there!



## 4. When You Call

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Is...is it...?” He stops, swallowing loudly, and Steve sees then how hard he’s struggling to hold himself still. Sees it in the tightness of his shoulders. In the pitch of each quick, controlled breath. In the rigid, trembling muscle of his back and buttocks. And he sees something else too—how, despite all of that effort, Billy Hargrove’s knees are shaking.

Billy clears his throat and tries again around what sounds like a throat full of gravel. “Is it...n-normal for there to be b-blood?”

And then (and Steve would never use this word to the guy’s face but), Billy Hargrove honest-to-god *swoons*.

### Notes for the Chapter:

I'm baaa-aaaaaack! Wow guys, I thought I'd NEVER get this chapter finished. Anxiety is an evil, lying bitch. But this fic *truly* haunts my brain, in the best and worst of ways, and between Nanowrimo and the release of the ST3 trailer this week, I've been able to find the motivation to keep pounding away. THAT BEING SAID, this chapter is unbeta'ed, and even though I've read, re-read, and re-wrote this baby literally dozens upon dozens of times, it's entirely possible something slipped by. My apologies for any errors you may see. On the upside, this chapter's over 7000 words, so...yay? Hopefully it'll have been worth the wait.

For those of you who still cheered me on when it looked like I had abandoned this story, especially those of you who left such kind, motivating comments on the previous chapters (especially Ihni!),

*thank you.* I'm utterly, befuddledly grateful.

Additional notes, including content warnings, at the end of the chapter.

Normally Steve's a deep sleeper (and yeah, a late sleeper too, one of the many reasons his dad thinks Steve "lacks drive"). He's prone to waking up groggy and cranky and a little lost, even when he's gotten the full eight hours. It's just how he is.

But not today.

Today, he'd woken up in the murky, pre-dawn light and immediately, *BOOM*, he'd known. *Max*. He'd forgotten Max. He's fretting and pacing, actually *pacing*, beside the phone in the kitchen, knowing that he definitely can't call Max's to check on her, and debating whether or not he should just call Hopper now (but...*no cops*, Billy had pleaded), when it rings, startling him. He answers immediately.

"Steve—" Max starts, and before she can get any farther, the words come tumbling out of Steve's mouth.

"Max! Shit! Are you okay? Do you need help? Do you need me? Do you need me to call Hopper? What do you need?" he babbles, fisting a hand in his hair as the wheels spin in his head. He'll hang up. Call Hopper right now if he has to. Tell him everything and then grab his bat and make a break for Max's house in the Beemer. He'll do... *something*. Somehow. Anything. He realizes he's saying all of this aloud when she has to cut him off to get a word in edgewise.

"Steve. Steve. *Steve!* I'm *fine*. Neil doesn't mess with me. He just—he only hurts Billy. Is...is he okay?"

Steve sags forward against the counter with a sigh. He scrubs a hand down his face, lets his forehead gently *thunk* against the cabinet. Feels belated guilt rise up to wrap angry fingers around his throat. He's such an idiot. *Shit*, this could have been SO much worse than it already is.

But Max is still talking. "*Steve*," she repeats, still urgent, still hushed. "Did you find him? Is he okay?"

"It's alright, I found him. I got him," he rushes to assure her, struggling to speak around the worried trip of his pulse.

"But is he *okay*?"

"Yeah, yeah, he's okay." Steve *thinks* it's true.

"Okay. Good. Great. But...you're sure?" She sounds dubious, and Steve wonders how much shit this kid really witnessed last night. Jesus.

"He's sleeping it off on the couch right now. He's...pretty banged up, but he's going to be fine, Max." Physically, at least. "I swear." And hopes he isn't telling an inadvertent lie. Guesses he'll find out soon enough.

"So...you'll keep him safe?" she asks. It throws Steve for a loop.

"I—what?"

"I know what he's like, Steve, okay? More than anyone. But you didn't...you didn't see it. You weren't *there*." Steve has watched this kid face down demodogs with less fear than he hears in her voice right now.

"Max..." He doesn't mean for the words to sound so pleading.

Her voice wobbles as she continues, as if Steve hadn't spoken at all. "Please don't let him come back here right now. Please don't...don't make me watch Neil hurt him again. I don't think I can handle it. *Please, Steve.*"

What the hell can Steve even say to that?

"Okay, Max. Okay." What the hell can he say to that? The same thing he always does, apparently.

She makes him swear again, and he does, and then they hang up and he lets his head *thunk* against the cabinet once more. Harder this time.

*Shit.*

He picks up the phone again, starts dialing with shaky hands.

“This is Jim Hopper, Hawkins Chief of Police.”

Steve’s had the number for the direct line to Hopper’s office since last November—they all have it now—but he’s never had any reason to use it before. Not until this moment.

“Hop! I mean, um, Chief...hey. It’s uh, it’s Steve. Steve Harrington.”

There’s a pause. “What’s going on, kid?”

“Um. So, hypothetically...”

A sigh. “What did you do?”

“Nothing! Seriously. I’m just asking for a friend—hypothetically.”

“Spit it out.”

“So, say I have this friend who has...parental trouble. Like...his dad hits him. Hurts him. Not a little, but like, *bad*. And he needs...he needs to get away from that. What should he do?”

“This friend of yours...he a teenager like you?”

“...Could be, yeah.”

“Is he over eighteen?”

“I don’t...I don’t think so.”

“Do any adults know what’s happening to this friend? Apart from me?”

“I...don’t think so.”

There’s a pause on the line. “Alright kid, you know I have to ask—is everything okay at home?”

“It’s not me! Uh, hypothetically. Let’s just say it’s...not anyone you know.”

“Uh huh. Gotcha. Let’s say that’s the case. So here’s the thing: sounds like your *friend* is in a pretty sticky situation. So he needs to talk to an adult that can help. A teacher, or a school counselor, or a *cop*. An official report can be made. Child Protective Services would come in and investigate, and if they found evidence of any abuse—”

“Wait, wait...IF? What kind of evidence do they need, apart from the *bruises* all over his *body*?” Steve hears his voice climbing in volume, and he has to check himself, remember to keep it down.

“That would probably be enough.”

“Probably?!”

“Well the *problem* is, we’re talking in hypotheticals here, kid, so I don’t know what I don’t know. But look, if your friend is willing to come in and talk to me—”

“I don’t think that would work—”

“If your friend is willing to come in, *hypothetically*, and talk to me, we can figure this out. Together.”

Uh-oh. This might have been a mistake.

The thing is, Steve’s eighteen. He’s a grown man. He’s been in charge of himself on and off (but mostly on) since before he was old enough to drive, and his mom started staying in the condo in Chicago to be closer (read: keep tabs on) his dad while he’s working in the city (which is pretty much always). And Steve’s *fine*. He’s totally independent, capable of taking care of himself and anyone else that comes along, no problem (even if his hands do shake sometimes). Right? Right. Except.

Except...see, okay, sometimes Steve’s The Guy. *That* Guy. The one who went back for Nancy and Jonathan that night, despite the fact that he was piss-scared, despite the fact that he could have just climbed in his car and driven away. The Guy that fought off demodogs in a junkyard while a bunch of kids hiding on a bus looked on in awe, and thought he was *cool* because of it. The Guy who’d always been perfectly fine with being called King Steve, because...

well, why not?

But sometimes (more and more often, it seems), he's anything but That Guy. Those times, he's not much of anything at all.

Still, these kids—Dustin, Max, all of them—they keep coming to him, thinking Steve can *do* stuff. Like...handling the situation when things go wrong. Like...fixing problems like Billy Hargrove. And Steve *likes* the kids, truly. But Steve isn't sure he can fix shit.

And okay, he's done a pretty convincing job of pretending to still be That Guy, of maintaining the kids' misplaced belief in him. But he can feel the edges fraying, and sooner or later—but probably sooner because that's Steve's luck these days—he's going to be that other version of himself, the one that isn't King Steve, the one that isn't anything but weak and tired and lonely and *fucked up* and then...and then he...and then Billy Hargrove *cannot* be there to watch when it happens. Steve can't let anyone see that. He won't.

But then the phone had rung, and he'd found himself promising Max he'd fix this, *help* Billy somehow...

*You break it, you bought it.*

...And he'd known, all of a sudden, that it was too much. Too big. And Steve had wanted someone else to fix it. To be the adult, the *real* adult, and make everything alright. Because he couldn't.

He can't. He absolutely cannot fix Billy Hargrove.

But neither, he realizes now, can Hopper. Because Billy Hargrove is terrified of cops. *No cops*, he'd said, multiple times, panic in his voice. Pretty much made Steve swear. No cops. It would take an act of God to get him to even *consider* talking to a cop, Steve's sure, and the minute Hop used any of those words he'd said to Steve—"probably" or "if" or "maybe"—Billy Hargrove was going to run. Odds are, *if* Billy hears Steve's conversation, figures out he's been talking to the police, after promising him last night that he wouldn't, Billy's going to run anyway.

And Billy might be the new King of Hawkins HS these days, but when

he was in trouble last night...Billy was alone. Billy *is* alone. And Steve knows, from personal experience, that people do really stupid shit when they think they're alone. He might not know Billy that well, but he knows the pure animal terror he'd witnessed last night.

Yeah, Steve knows that feeling to the bone.

So the point is: it had been a bad idea, this knee-jerk decision to call Hopper, and he's got to fix it *now*, before his mistake turns into catastrophe.

*You break it, you bought it. You break it, you bought it.*

"Yeah, that's not going to happen, Hop. Hypothetically or otherwise. I really shouldn't have called."

"Kid—Steve, listen..."

"No, Hop, *please*, listen to me." He stumbles over his words, trying to get Hopper to understand. "Forget I called. Forget I said anything. Forget it all. I know that's not your thing, but...but..."

"But *what*, kid?"

"But you've just *gotta* trust me on this. I can't say any more, but it's... it's more important than you know. Please."

There's such a long pause this time, Steve wonders if Hopper's hung up. Finally there's a weary sigh down the line. "Okay, look. You're been through *a lot* this year. We all have. And don't think I don't know that you're the reason those kids got out of those tunnels in one piece."

Steve must make some kind of noise at that, because Hopper says, "*Yeah*, I know. Have for a while. Point is, I know you think you've got a handle on things, and I'm making a choice to trust your judgement here. I am making. A choice. *Do not make me regret that.*"

"Hop—" Steve stops himself. Because he'd kind of had the insane urge to correct Hopper just then, to tell him that he actually has *no idea what the fuck he's doing*. But luckily, Hop's not finished.

“No. Listen, kid. You think about this. Think about it **HARD**. And if you change your mind, if you decide you need *anything*, you give me a call. Day or night. Mike Wheeler knows how to reach me after hours, and I know you know how to reach him, so time of day isn’t an excuse, got it?”

Steve worries at his bottom lip, nodding, then realizes Hop can’t see him. “Got it. Yes. Definitely,” he answers.

“Good. Don’t forget it. Day. Or night.” There’s a weary sigh and then the line goes dead, and Steve wonders what the hell he’s supposed to do now.

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The acoustics in the downstairs bathroom are seriously awful, is the thing. Something to do with the vents or the insulation or... something. Even with the door closed, you can hear...pretty much everything. It’s why Steve has refused to use the downstairs bathroom since he was like, twelve. It’s also why he’s heard pretty much everything happening in there since Billy woke up and things between them went *exactly* as awkwardly as Steve had feared they would...

“Where’s the head, Harrington?”

Billy was sitting upright and motionless—so very, carefully still—on the couch when Steve returned to the living room after hanging up with Hopper. In his preoccupied state, Steve hadn’t even noticed Billy was up as he’d passed him, and he’d nearly jumped out of his skin when Billy spoke. And then, for reasons Steve doesn’t understand, he’d gone hot all over. And, what the hell? Why was *Steve* feeling embarrassed? It’s not like *he* was the one spread out weakly on his worst enemy’s couch, needing his help. Needing his kindness.

Billy had interrupted his inner monologue then, his tone slow and deliberate, like he’d thought he was talking to a simpleton. “I *said*:



Where. Is. The head?"

*Screw you.* The words were on the tip of his tongue, a knee-jerk response to the other boy's tone.

Then he'd caught sight of Billy's grim, hollow-eyed face. The way his gaze was fixed on some distant spot on the floor in front of him, refusing to meet Steve's. The way the line of his mouth had gone flat and dejected. It was like...the lights were on, but Billy Hargrove wasn't home. It had stopped Steve in his tracks.

"I don't...I mean...huh?" Steve finally says, ever articulate. He shakes his head. "I mean, are you okay? 'Cause you look—" Lost. Fucked up. Bad.

Billy had sighed hard through his nose, his jaw working, his eyes flinching shut. When he'd opened them again, he'd glanced toward Steve for a split second before flicking his gaze back down to the same distant spot on the carpet. "Point your fucking finger in the direction of the nearest john, Harrington." His voice was a hollow rasp.

Steve had swallowed any other words he had and complied, pointing down the hall. "Second door on the left." He'd hesitated for a second before adding, "But uh...you really shouldn't—"

But by then Billy was already struggling to his feet, faster than Steve would have thought possible, too fast for him to offer help, and then he was limping off in the direction Steve had indicated.

Steve had *known* he should say something else. Lots of something elses. Like, a word of warning about how bad it could be, that first time using the bathroom after taking a shot to the genitals. Like, instructions to prepare for the weak knees and the achy, trembling soreness that would dominate your whole pelvis. Like, a heads up about how that soreness would probably turn into full blown throbbing *pain* again, that first time you bore down to empty your bladder (and the second and the third times, and maybe a couple of times after that too, if you were really unlucky). Like, a reassurance not to freak out if you saw a little bit of pink in the water, because that was pretty normal, as long as it *was* just a little bit. And like, a

recommendation that, in the end, it was just easier if you swallowed your pride and sat down like a girl for the whole ordeal.

But he didn't do any of that. Because he'd been a little disturbed by the scary emptiness he'd glimpsed in Billy's eyes. And because he was still wrestling with that weird sense of sourceless embarrassment.

Plus, he'd doubted the guy would have reacted well to phrases like "swallow your pride" OR "sit down like a girl" and Steve just....sucks at not pissing Billy off with his words (and his actions really, come to think of it), so he'd just stood there, silent and uncertain.

It was stupid. But a thing being stupid has never stopped Steve Harrington from doing it, not even once.

So now Steve's waiting, hovering uselessly in the middle of his living room, not sure what he's waiting for, just....waiting.

"...rington?"

The word is quiet, spoken low and tentative, *furtive* almost, even though they're the only ones in the house. But thanks to those shitty bathroom acoustics, Steve catches it anyway, and immediately his feet are moving. Because there was an urgency in that one low word, a stifled panic that lends speed to Steve's steps, and by the time Billy clears his throat and says again, louder, more frantic now, "*Harrington?*" Steve's already at the bathroom door.

The door is shut, but not all the way. "Yeah?" Steve says through the crack. When there's no answer, he pushes his way in.

Billy's standing at the toilet, his back to Steve. He has one hand braced flat against the wall behind the toilet, his head hanging low. His shirt is rucked up just a little in the back, and the dual waistbands of his pants and underwear sag, showing off the bare upper curve of buttocks in the gap between. It's a vulnerable sight, and Steve knows, instinctively, that this is a scene Billy wouldn't want him to see, and all at once, he has that weird-ass feeling again, like he's an intruder in his own house. His face heats, and he looks to the side, trying to see out of his periphery without actually *seeing*.

“Hargrove? You, you okay man?”

Billy doesn't turn. Doesn't move at all. There's a tremor in his voice when he answers. “Is...is it...?” He stops, swallowing loudly, and Steve sees then how hard he's struggling to hold himself still. Sees it in the tightness of his shoulders. In the pitch of each quick, controlled breath. In the rigid, trembling muscle of his back and buttocks. And he sees something else too—how, despite all of that effort, Billy Hargrove's knees are shaking.

Billy clears his throat and tries again around what sounds like a throat full of gravel. “Is it...n-normal for there to be b-blood in the toilet bowl?”

And then (and Steve would never use this word to the guy's face but), Billy Hargrove honest-to-god *swoons*.

Steve lurches forward with a speed usually reserved for escapades involving nail bats and demodogs, just managing to catch Billy around the waist and chest before his face collides with the wall. And so for the second time in 24 hours, Steve Harrington finds himself bearing the solid form of a semi-conscious Billy Hargrove back against his own body. But in the bathroom this time. In front of the toilet. With Hargrove's pants halfway down his ass.

Unbelievable.

Billy's still keeping his feet under him on his own steam (barely) but Steve's supporting a good part of his weight, and if the guy goes all the way out...well, they're in the hall bathroom. Where the hell is he going to put him?

Steve kind of...gently butts his head against the back of Billy's, curly blond hair tickling his nose. “Hey. Hey man. Billy! You...you still with me?”

Billy lifts his head, shakes it woozily as he comes back to himself, and starts batting (ineffectively) at the arm Steve has looped around his waist. “Lemme go, Harrington. ‘M fine.”

“Uhhh yeah, not gonna happen. You just tried to take a header into

my toilet. I'll let go when we're closer to the couch." *And far, far away from any sight likely to make you swoon like a girl again*, he nearly adds.

"You'd...fucking better," comes Billy's weak rebuttal.

In the end, Billy does manage to walk most of the way on his own, though Steve hangs close behind, spotting him like he's a toddler who's just learned how to walk.

By the time they reach the couch, Billy's pants (still undone) have worked themselves down to catch somewhere just above his knees.

"Son of a *bitch*!" Billy tries to kind of nudge-kick-shimmy the pants all the way off, clearly not keen on the pain that pulling the restrictive garment back up would produce, but...well, put it this way: restrictive is kind of an understatement. Billy isn't exactly popular with the girls at school for the *relaxed* fit of his jeans. No matter what he tries, Billy's seriously hobbled by the tight tangle of denim. And the top half of his ass is *still* out.

Steve casts his eyes ceilingward. Takes a deep breath. "Do you need...?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"I said I've got it—"

"I....don't think you do."

"*Yeah*, I do, I've just gotta..." And then, finally, with a hand braced on the back of the couch for balance, Billy actually manages to shimmy out of them. He collapses into a immodest sprawl on the couch, underwear rucked unevenly down his hips in a way that just *barely* preserves his dignity. He throws an arm over his face, hiding his eyes in the crook of his elbow and groans. "Harrington, I think I'll take that ice pack now."

In that moment, Steve would like nothing more than to go get that ice pack and put some distance between them, *truly* he would; but

instead he hangs back, hovering beside the couch, because he knows he's gotta ask. "Yeah man, sure. But uh, you mentioned something about blood...in the toilet?"

Billy groans again behind his arm, a nauseated, helpless sound. "Don't remind me. I'm trying to forget."

"But how much blood?" Steve pushes, worried once again that he'd made a mistake last night, not driving Billy straight to the hospital. And then made another one this morning, turning down Hopper's help.

"I don't fucking *know*," Billy whines, banging his head back against the cushion.

Steve crouches cautiously beside him. "Billy, man, come on, look at me." The other boy complies warily. Up close, the color is high in his cheeks, and there's a slick sheen of sweat on his forehead and upper lip. On instinct, Steve presses his hand to Billy's forehead, then to his cheek, checking for fever like his mom used to do when Steve was sick. He doesn't really know what he's feeling for. Billy feels warm... but how warm is too warm? He realizes what he's doing and snatches his hand back. "Uh, sorry." He braces for a dig that never comes.

Steve isn't sure if something's really wrong or not. Maybe this can just be chalked up to pain and fear—the physical and emotional exhaustion from last night combining with the panic of seeing a little pink in the toilet bowl. But either way, Steve's about five seconds away from calling for an ambulance unless Billy can give him a reason not to. He tells him so.

"So help me out," he finishes. "How much blood? Rough estimate. I just need to make sure you're not...hemorrhaging or something."

Billy leans up to grab a fistful of Steve's sleeve. "*Hemorrhaging*? Can that fucking happen?"

"I don't know," Steve says. "I really have no idea. But if I know how much—"

Billy's eyes are feverishly bright. "*Blood*, Harrington. That's all I

know. I looked down, I saw red, and that's when the room went all fucking...wobbly on me. I don't know what else to tell you!"

"Okay, okay, easy." He has to uncurl the fingers from his sleeve when the other boy won't let go. "I've gotta go look. I'll be right back. Just...stay calm. I'm sure it's not that bad."

Except he's not sure at all. His heart's in his throat when he enters the bathroom. What if the guy is really hurt? What if it's Steve's fault for not doing more? What if he's fucked everything up again? Feeling slightly dizzy himself, he looks down at the water...

And lets out a huge sigh of relief. The water's maybe a little pink. That's all. It's no worse than what he'd seen after his own... unfortunate groin situation a couple years ago. He rubs a hand against his sternum, willing his pounding heartbeat to calm down.

"It's all good," he calls back to the living room. He continues when he's back, crouched again beside Billy's supine form on the couch. "You're all good. No hemorrhaging—the water's barely pink. You probably saw a few drops in the water and your brain freaked. Believe me, I get it. Same thing happened to me. It looks like gallons of blood when you know it just came out of your own dick."

Billy rubs a shaky hand down his face. "You're sure, Harrington? Don't fucking...fuck with me on this."

"I'm telling you, it looked okay in the bathroom. I mean, how does everything look and feel...downstairs? Was there any swelling or bruising? Or...blood blisters? Did the skin feel...you know, tight?"

"I don't know, I didn't look," Billy mumbles.

Steve knows for a *fact* that's not true. "You looked last night!"

"I was HIGH, Harrington!"

Steve bites back on the urge to yell. "Well, you've gotta look now."

Billy shakes his head frantically. "No, I can't. I can't. I can't. Y-y-you have do it."

Hold on, what? It's like a record scratch in Steve's head. "No. Uh uh. *No way. Not gonna happen.*" There is no way Steve's...inspecting some other guy's crotch. Especially not the same guy that accused him of intentionally trying to sneak a peek just last night!

"Harrington...what if I'm dying? What if they're going to turn black and...and....fall off?!"

"Oh, for Christ's...they're not going to turn—"

"What if they *do*?!"

"Then I will take you to the hospital before than hap—"

"Nonononono. No hospitals." There's a growing note of hysteria in Billy's voice.

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. Squeezes his eyes shut. Sighs.

This guy. No cops. No hospitals. No responsible adults who might actually know what to *do* in situations like this, apparently.

Steve can't look. He won't. But...somebody has to, because Billy's going greener and greener around the gills with each passing moment.

Fuck.

*Why* does this shit always happen to Steve?

Steve rubs a hand down over his face. Closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "Fine. Okay, fine. Fine. Just...if this is happening, then...we're friends." He crouches back down beside the couch and pretends to fiddle with his shoelace so he doesn't actually have to look at Billy's face when he says the words.

"What?" Billy asks. Steve's pretty sure he can actually *hear* Billy Hargrove frowning right now.

Steve shakes his head. He can hear his heartbeat in his ears. "This whole thing is too weird man. I—I can't do this for some jerk who, who hates my guts or whatever—it's like, too much. But I...I think I

could do it to help out a friend. I think. So, you and me, if I'm doing this, then we're friends. Okay?"

He finds the stones to open his eyes and meet Billy's gaze, expecting to see another sneer on his face. But Billy isn't sneering at all. His expression is wide open and unsure. Nervous, even. "Y-yeah. Yes, okay, friends."

This will go down, unquestionably, as the most awkward weekend of Steve's life. Beyond a shadow of a doubt. And Steve's been on a fishing trip with Ted Wheeler.

He perches awkwardly on the edge of the couch at Billy's hip. He can't believe he's about to do...what he's about to do. Contrary to Billy's little dig last night, Steve actually *hasn't* seen a dick up close. Well, other than his own. *Obviously*.

Now Billy has both hands covering his face. He's taking short, anxious breaths, chest heaving. He's going to start hyperventilating any second.

Okay. Okay. Steve can do this. Not like he's got anything Steve hasn't seen in the locker room before.

"Alright, let's get this over with," he murmurs. "You ready?"

Billy nods, uncovering his face but keeping his eyes shut. Gingerly, he edges his thumbs under the elastic of his waistband and pushes his own underwear down to his thighs.

Steve had said he'd look, but on instinct, he still finds himself averting his eyes. He nearly jumps out of his skin when he feels a hand fisting into the back of his shirt.

"Christ, Harrington. Is it bad? Fucking say something." Billy's white-knuckling the fabric of Steve's shirt so hard, his hand is vibrating. Steve glances down, sees Billy's bare legs, sees that even his feet are shaking.

"Harrington, *say something!*" Billy growls, or tries to, but his voice cracks a little, his urgency palpable.



Something about the need in Billy's voice, the insecurity...instead of it making Steve want to run away this time, it grounds him. Not completely—he's still hot all over with embarrassment, trying to ignore the uncomfortable intimacy of the act—but enough to do what he needs to do. "Okay, easy," he says, retrieving last night's discarded blanket from the floor and tossing it over Billy's bare lower half, tucking it under his feet, covering his exposed parts. Then carefully, with light hands, he folds it back so just his lap is bared. And then, deliberately, Steve *looks*.

Even though he's supposed to be checking out Billy's...equipment, the first details that filter into Steve's brain are his other parts: his flat belly, fluttering with each stuttery, nervous breath he takes; his hip, marred by an ugly strawberry bruise cresting around the side of it, like he'd landed on it and *slid* (or been dragged); his pubic hair, dark blond and surprisingly full for someone with so little body hair anywhere else. Then Steve's gazes shifts and finally, almost without meaning to, he notices...what he's actually supposed to notice.

Everything's normal. Steve lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. Billy's...his, well, his *penis* lays soft and quiescent against his thigh. His balls are softly furred and full, but they're not swollen, at least, not as far as Steve can tell. As Billy had said in his Percocet-fueled haze last night, everything is "still in one piece." There's no blood, no swelling, no apparent tightening or hardening of the skin. His balls *might* be a little bruised, but he doesn't know what Billy's sac looks like when it *hasn't* been injured, and some people are just naturally ruddier down there and—*nnnnngghhh*. This cannot be his life. Blood rushes to Steve's face and his stomach clenches and even his toes fucking tingle with embarrassment as he stifles an embarrassed groan. He's *actually* contemplating the natural ruddiness of Billy Hargrove's privates. There's not enough alcohol in the world to make him forget this awkwardness.

Hastily, Steve flips the blanket back up, covering him. "You're uh, you're all good," he says, unable to bring his eyes any higher than Billy's chin. "I'm going to, uh..." *Run away now*. "...get that ice pack that you mentioned. Be right back." Then he's off.

He stays gone long enough to give them both time to gather themselves. Long enough to open the freezer door and will the chilly

air to calm the heat in his cheeks. When he returns, ice pack in tow, Billy's in the same position. His eyes are closed again, but it looks like much of the tension has left his body now.

"You good?" Steve asks. Billy flashes him a thumbs up without ever lifting his head or opening his eyes. "Um, here you go." Billy takes the proffered ice pack and, lifting the blanket (he's repositioned his underwear while Steve was gone, Steve sees, thank God), cautiously settles it square on his crotch with a wince. A second later he's grabbing it and flinging it away. "A-AH! Shit! No way! That *hurts* Harrington, what the *fuck*?"

Steve can't help it; he rolls his eyes. "Well you can't just drop it flat on your crotch, man. Of course it's going to hurt if you do it like that. You have to place it...strategically."

"Of course, leave it to the fucking dick-ologist."

Steve sends him a withering look.

Hargrove actually has the good grace to look mildly repentant. "... Sorry. I'm sorry, okay? If it was your dick, you'd be a dick too. I just...can't. It fucking hurts."

Steve picks up the ice pack and holds it out again. "Look, it's really not that bad. You've just gotta...place it a little differently." And now he's actually having a discussion with Billy freaking Hargrove on the best method for icing your balls. It's unreal. What did he ever do to deserve this?

Billy takes the pack from him. "Like how?"

And once again, Steve feels like he's in dangerous territory. Hargrove's fine with action, but he's got a hang-up about words, and it's giving Steve a freaking complex, and there is no good way to say this. *Open your legs?* NOPE. *Spread your legs a little?* Oh God, definitely not. He thinks he feels the tips of his ears going red again. *Head in the game. Head in the game.*

He tries, "First just, you know...make some room for the ice pack." There, better.

Billy obliges, the bumps of his knees moving apart underneath the blanket.

“Now, *gently*, just prop it...you know like, *against*, not *on top of*.”

Billy lifts the blanket and complies, *gingerly* placing the ice pack just as Steve had instructed. There’s a moment when nothing happens, then the cold registers. Billy sucks in a sharp breath and curls up, before slamming his head back down against the pillow and groaning into his hands.

He digs his fists into his eyes. “Dammit Harrington, I thought you said this would HELP!”

Steve drops to his haunches beside the other boy, grabs his shoulder. “Okay just...RELAX, try to breathe through it. It’ll get better, I promise. And stop biting yourself, that’s not gonna help.”

Billy’s got the fleshy mound beneath his thumb caught between his teeth, but at Steve’s words he nods and lets go, breathing harshly through his nose, moving the hand to grasp blindly at Steve’s arm.

He mutters something. It kinda sounds like, *oughta fucking bite you*, Steve thinks, but he can’t be sure. Billy keeps a one-handed death grip on Steve’s forearm, the saliva on his palm sticky against Steve’s skin. It’s not until Steve says, “I can give you another Percocet to help with the pain,” that he lets go. Steve squeezes his shoulder one last time before he rises, noticing that his own knees are shaking a little now.

Before the pill knocks him out again, Billy says, “Hey, Harrington?”

“...yeah?”

“Don’t let me freeze my dick off with this thing if I fall asleep.”

Steve’s laugh is more from relief than actual amusement. “Yeah man, I’ve got you.”

Billy sleeps until late afternoon. Steve isn't sure which version of Billy he's going to get when he wakes: the hostile, belligerent, angry version or the scared, needy, slightly-less-angry version. Instead he gets a third, heretofore unknown option: subdued, rattled, embarrassed Billy. One who is resigned to his fate, whatever that may be, apparently.

Steve returns from a bathroom break to find him sitting cross-legged on the couch, blanket wrapped tightly around him like a shield.

"You can take me home now, Harrington," Billy says quietly, his voice fraying and desolate. He's slumped over, so shrunken in on himself that it's like looking at a completely different person. It looks like Billy Hargrove's been through a battle and barely made it out the other side. Steve guesses he kind of has.

"Y-you, you want me to take you back home right now?" Steve asks, disbelief making him stammer. "Seriously?"

The corners of Billy's mouth pull down hard for a split second. Then he meets Steve's eyes, his own hard and bleak, and says, "That's what I just said."

"...but why?"

"Why do you *care*?"

"Why don't *you*?"

"Because...fucking because, that's why. It's none of your goddamn business."

"Did you take the money?"

"NO!" Billy straightens for a second, meeting Steve's eyes, but just like that, the fire goes right back out of him, and he deflates again,

slumping back against the couch. "You know I didn't."

"Do you think your dad has had time to cool off or something?"

A shrug.

"Is he going to believe you now?"

Another shrug. Then Billy shakes his head.

"So what's going to happen to you if you go back?" Steve voice is louder than it should be. He hears it, tries to modulate it back down, but he's...he's *scared* for the other boy. Just this morning he'd badly wanted Billy out of his house, yeah, but he can't imagine actually taking him back home.

Billy shrugs again, seemingly impervious to the fear for his well-being that has taken hold of Steve. "I don't know. He'll probably smack me around some more. Maybe he'll just...I don't know. I don't know."

"Could you pay the money back? I mean, I know you didn't steal it, but if you replaced what he says was taken, would it smooth things over?" The wheels are already turning in his head. Maybe he could loan Billy the cash...

Billy gives him that damned listless shrug again. "I don't know how much he thinks I took. If I give him too much, he'll think I'm owning up to taking more; if I give him too little, he'll just get mad again, and we're right back at square one. Besides, I can't give him money I don't have. I don't have anywhere else to go. I just gotta take whatever punishment he dishes out, like a man." His upper lip curls when he says that last bit, *like a man*. "I'll handle it. Like I always do."

"Yeah? How's that working out for you?" Even though the words just came out of his own mouth, they even surprise Steve. Oops.

"Excuse me?" Billy narrows his eyes, a little bit of that familiar fire returning.

"Yeah, I'm not taking you back there. Not without a better plan than that," Steve informs him.

“Oh fuck you, Harrington! Aren’t you supposed to be my *friend* now? So fucking help me the fuck out, like a fucking friend would!”

Steve nods, scratches the back of his head idly. “Yeah, yeah, so the thing is, I don’t let my *friends* walk into a situation where someone is going to beat them half to death. Especially when I just spent last night and most of the morning patching them up.”

It looks like Billy’s winding up to unleash a torrent of verbal abuse when Steve’s words actually hit him. He opens and closes his mouth a couple of times, seemingly at a complete loss. “So what am I supposed to do?” he finally says. “Stay here the rest of the school year? Never go home again? Wear your clothes to school like some jackassed country club clone?”

“I mean, I dig a Canadian tuxedo as much as the next guy, but let’s be real: my clothes would definitely be an improvement on your whole...denim-on-denim thing. But no, I was only thinking about you hanging here like, another night or two. Just until everyone has a chance to really cool off. And until I can come up with a better plan than the one you’ve got.”

“Until YOU can come up with a better plan?”

“Yeah, me. Why not? I’m actually pretty good at plans.” Well, he’s alright at plans, but he’s *clearly* better at it than Hargrove. “Come on, it’s not like you’ve got anything better going on.”

Billy snorts, but doesn’t argue the point. “So what do I do about school on Monday? He took my keys. I don’t have any clean clothes. And I’m NOT borrowing something of yours, so don’t even suggest it.”

“So you hitch a ride with me. We’ll get there early and Max can meet us with a change of clothes for you.”

Billy glowers. “I’m her ride to school. And even if that little bitch would help me, which she won’t, she has no way to get there.”

Steve returns his glower full force. “First of all, that ‘little bitch’ is the only reason you didn’t freeze to death in the snow last night, so

maybe don't call her that. Second of all, Max is pretty resourceful, and so am I, for the record. Leave the rest to us, okay?"

Billy chews on his lip. He shakes his head, takes a deep breath, and then—

The phone rings.

They both look in the direction of the ringing phone, then back at each other. Steve hesitates, not wanting to leave if Billy was about to agree to his proposal, but Billy lifts his eyebrows and says, "Go on and answer it, *friend*. I'm not gonna steal the silver while you're gone, Jesus."

Steve goes.

"Hello?"

"Hey, kid." The caller doesn't have to identify himself, Steve knows that perpetually sardonic voice.

"Uhhh hey, Hop. We're doing fine." He slaps a hand over his face. *Way to go, idiot*. "Uh, hypothetical—"

"Yeah, I get it pal. You've got the situation under control for now. That's not why I'm calling. I was wondering if you and your *friend* knew about the storm."

"What storm?"

"Well that answers that. Try watching the news sometime, kid. There's another storm front moving in to hit us tonight. I'm hearing now that it's going to be a lot worse than they originally thought. I know you're used to staying alone, but I want to make sure you're stocked to feed two, in case you get snowed in. They're saying this one might be bringing ice on top of snow."

"No sir, I...definitely didn't know." Once again, Steve is struck by how bad he is at...everything. Even just acting like the grown-up he should be, apparently. Still, he's got plenty of food in the cabinets—he's at least good at cooking for him self—and plenty of wood for the fireplace if the power goes out. He assures Hopper that he and his

confirmed guest (there's really no hiding it now, not that there truly was before) are prepared to ride out the storm, and thanks him for calling, before hanging up.

"That was a friend," he tells Billy, back in the living room. "He was calling with news. Looks like there's a really bad snowstorm coming in tonight. Like, we're talking snowed-in, school's cancelled bad. So it looks like neither one of us is going anywhere."

"You've gotta be kidding me," Billy says.

Steve shakes his head. "Not even a little. And you know, all of a sudden I'm feeling pretty hungry. How about you? Want a Hot Pocket?" He smiles.

Billy just gapes at him.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

\*\*CW for some details of groin injuries, including pain + a very small amount of blood in the character's urine, as well as injury-induced hypochondria/anxiety attacks. Billy isn't grievously injured, but his pain and emotional duress lead him to believe he is.

Tumblr might be slowly expiring, but I'm still there, under the same username: LaVeraceVia. Feel free to message me with asks or to just chat. Feedback is love! Thank you again for reading! <3



## 5. To Your Dreams

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Hey!! Pssst! Hey, Harrington! Wake the fuck UP! There’s something on the roof!”

Steve’s on his feet with no memory of how he got there, and going for the bat, or the gun—where the hell is the gun?!—before the sounds from the roof actually have time to register.

*...in which the storm rolls in, and the shit hits the fan. Repeatedly.*

### Notes for the Chapter:

To my lovely, generous friends who helped beta this fic: mAadMax and LacyMarie, thank you so much. You guys rock! <3<3<3

This chapter clocked in at juuuuust over 9400 words. Yep, you read that right. Because it's either feast or famine with my writing, turns out, and I'm in feast mode right now. No guarantees that the next chapter will have such a fast turnaround, but I'm hoping to stick to a schedule of a new chapter every 2-3 weeks(ish). Cross your fingers for me.

Content warnings and more thanks in the end notes.

As the sun sets, the temperature drops steeply and snow starts falling fast in big, fluffy clumps. Steve turns the thermostat up, checks in on a sleeping Billy. He marvels again at these strange new spurts of... not-hate that he’s starting to feel towards the guy. The guy who, up until 24 hours ago, ranked somewhere just under otherworldly monsters as one of the undisputed Worst Things In The World.

But that's the thing—there's something that changes inside you, once you've seen a person break. After you've watched them split wide open, and stepped in close to hold their edges together until they could reassemble the parts on their own. And Billy's...not really even at the reassembling stage yet.

It's...a lot to take, these past twenty-four hours, and even though all he's done is play nursemaid and talk on the phone a lot, Steve is exhausted and in desperate need of a good night's sleep. Still he finds himself sleeping in the recliner again, despite the fact that it left him with a stiff neck last night (not to mention that it gave him the discomfiting sensation that he might be turning into Ted Wheeler). Everything's okay now with Billy, probably, but...Steve still feels like he shouldn't leave him alone just yet.

It's a strange feeling, not being alone in the house for once, but it's also...not an *entirely* unwelcome one.

That is, until Billy decides to scare the *shit* out of him in the middle of the night.

“Hey!! *Pssst!* Hey, Harrington! Wake the fuck UP! There's something on the *roof!*”

Steve's on his feet with no memory of how he got there, and going for the bat, or the gun—where the hell is the gun?!—before the sounds from the roof actually have time to register.

The resulting relief hits him so hard his knees go soft. He gropes for something to steady himself and finds the arm of the couch, sinking down onto the opposite end gratefully. The room actually swims a little. He cradles his head in his hands, trying to breathe, trying to calm the desperate, jackhammer trip of his heart.

“Jesus *Christ*, it's just ice hitting the skylight Billy. It's just a fucking ice storm.” He pitches his voice low to hide how breathless he sounds. It's not an effective strategy.

“How the hell was I supposed to know that? We don't have *ice storms* in California. It sounded like bugs or claws or some shit,” Billy replies from down the couch, somewhere to his right.

Steve shudders at the thought of *claws*, shakes his head weakly, doesn't look up from his hunched over position. "Yeah, no more Percocet for you, buddy."

"What's eating you, Harrington? You look like you're gonna pass out. You need to like, breathe into a paper bag or something?" Billy's voice is closer than it was the last time he spoke. When Steve opens his eyes, Billy is peering at him curiously, from a sitting position, having scooted down the couch to a better vantage point. "'Cause I've gotta tell you, I've seen cokeheads less jumpy that you were just now."

Steve waves a hand dismissively. "You woke me up out of a dead sleep to tell me there was *something* on the roof. What the hell did you expect? Just, just go back to sleep, man."

Billy refuses to be deterred. He cocks his head, speculating. "This a thing that happens to you regularly?"

Steve shakes his foggy head. "No, it's just..." And for one mad second, he has the urge to spill everything. All the shit that's happened in Hawkins. All the shit that might happen again. How, a moment ago, he'd woken up thinking there were monsters on his roof, and his body had automatically gone into *go* mode, and now the unused adrenaline feels like it's going to burn through him, shake him apart...

Then common sense prevails. And he finishes lamely, "It's...it's not a thing. I don't want to talk about it, okay?" He scrubs his hands down his face.

"And yet, here you are, still sitting on my couch, looking like you're either going to spill your guts, or...puke 'em up," Billy comments quietly.

Steve snorts. It's not like he's wrong, but, "Just leave it, man. Also, it's *my* couch."

"Whatever you say, amigo." Billy shivers and tucks the blanket up tighter around himself. "Harrington, I'm fucking freezing. Does every asshole in Indiana usually keep the thermostat down so low?"

Steve's been so busy being freaked out that it doesn't really register until Billy says something—he's cold too. And he DOESN'T leave the thermostat turned down low...he likes to be warm when he sleeps. Also, the lamps are out, even though he left them on when he went to sleep, and the house is too quiet, absent even the usual white hum of the refrigerator. "Shit," he says, running nervous, still-tingling fingers through his hair. "The power's out."

The temperature in the house has already dipped noticeably. It's not that cold inside yet, just a little chilly, but it'll get there and then some, if the power doesn't come back on soon. He tells Billy he'll be back and moves off the couch on wobbly legs.

It's then, on his way upstairs, that he decides. He'd just meant to get them both some warmer clothes to change in to. But once he's up there, so near the temptation of his own bathroom, he can't resist.

He leans over the banister, whistles down at Billy to get his attention, then drops a folded pair of his sweats down for the other boy. "I'm going to be up here for a few minutes longer, grabbing more blankets and stuff," he lies. "You can change into these, if you want, until I can get back down to start the fire." He's so...ready that he barely hears Billy's grumbling response, but he can fill in the words anyway. Something to the effect of: *I'm not wearing your fucking clothes, Harrington.*

"Well then be cold, your choice," he tosses back over his shoulder, beyond caring about anything except the anticipation, in the moment.

His body won't calm entirely, won't pull back from the desperate edge that his rude awakening had him poised over. But as he stands in front of the mirror, watching himself unbuckling his pants and pushing them down his hips by the light of one lonely little decorative tealight, he knows the heaving of his chest and the heat filling his body isn't solely from the adrenaline comedown. He's...he's even chubbed up a little in his shorts in anticipation.

When he's finished, he rinses his hands off to hide the evidence. His head swims pleasantly. It's like this every time afterwards—no more jitters, no guilt (*that* will come later), just a soft, cloudy blankness

that leaves him drifting in a space where nothing can touch him. Or hurt him.

He goes back downstairs and systematically starts pulling out firewood from the rack and stacking it in the empty fireplace. The roughness of the bark feels good under his hands. Steve's always been a tactile person, but it's worse when he's like this. Remembering that he's not alone, he barely resists the urge to reach up and stroke his hand over the cool, abrasive stone of the fireplace, just to feel the sensation.

After some time, he becomes aware that Billy's calling his name from across the room.

"-arrington! HELLO, earth to Harrington!" he exclaims, snapping his fingers loudly.

Steve turns his head, blinking slowly. "Yeah?"

"I *said*, did you get the blankets?"

Oh yeah, he did tell him that he was going to get blankets. "Nah."

"Why not?"

"...Cause they're in the linen closet downstairs. I...forgot." He finally gets the fire going and stands, brushing his hands off languidly against his pants. "I'll get them now."

Billy narrows his eyes at him. "The hell's up with you, Harrington? You're even more off than you were a few minutes ago."

Muted panic spikes through the haze. *No one can know*. Steve tries to get ahold of himself, tries to hide his reaction, but Billy clocks it. Then, fortunately, he completely misreads the whole situation. "Oh shit, you're HIGH! You're higher than fucking giraffe pussy right now!" When Steve just blinks at him, Billy gives him a knowing grin. "Come on, be honest, Harrington, you've been dipping into the painkillers too."

Huh. Well, better he believes Steve's taking drugs than figure out what he's actually been doing. "Uh huh. That's it," he says, glancing

down and scratching the back of his neck, trying to hide his relief. “I-I took one before I got changed upstairs.”

“Well shit, man, share the wealth. I’m sore as fuck. And grab those extra blankets while you’re at it. I’m still fucking freezing! I thought these sweats were supposed to help!”

\*\*\*

Steve doesn’t wake until noon. He has the good sense to be embarrassed by how he’d acted—by what he *did*—last night, and he resolves not to do anything so reckless and stupid again. Well, not while Billy Hargrove’s still here, at least.

Speaking of Billy Hargrove, he’s still knocked out, wrapped so tightly in an enormous blanket cocoon that Steve can’t even see his face. This guy *seriously* hates the cold.

Steve had given him the requested Percocet last night, a fact he feels guiltier for now in the cold light of the morning than he did at the time, but he consoles himself with the knowledge that it was the last one in the bottle, and it’s not like the guy *wasn’t* in pain, even if that wasn’t Steve’s only reason for pretty much drugging him off to sleep.

While Billy nodded off last night in fluffy, narcotized bliss (for the second...nope, make that *third* time), Steve had cleared the floor in front of the fireplace, then spent the better part of an hour laboriously inflating the queen-sized air mattress (found in the linen closet with the spare blankets) in the space he’d cleared. There was no way he was going to spend another hour in that recliner, just so he could wake up stiff and cold, too far from the heat of the fireplace.

The effort paid off. He’s so comfortable when he wakes in his own nest of blankets that he’s reluctant to get up at all. But his full bladder and empty stomach are enough motivation to get him going in the end.

It's super cold in the kitchen, but the gas range stove gives him something to warm his hands at. He takes a moment to be glad he'd had the good sense to leave all the faucets open to a drip after Hopper's call. The only thing worse than a house with no power would have been a house with no power AND frozen pipes.

Omelets, he decides. He's hungry, they're quick and easy to make—not to mention hearty—and there's no way the eggs could have gone bad, even with the power out. Plus, if Steve's this hungry, Billy will be starving—he'd spent most of yesterday sleeping and had barely eaten, with the exception of the lone Hot Pocket Steve had all but force-fed him.

The thought of waking him up makes Steve nervous. "Friends" or not, things between the two of them are always some degree of awkward, and he's never sure which version of Billy he's going to end up with when he wakes. But it's not like they're getting any less snowed in anytime soon, so he might as well rip the bandaid off sooner rather than later; at least the eggs are still hot at the moment.

He puts a hand on what he thinks is Billy's shoulder—it's stupidly hard to tell with whole blanket burrito thing he's got going on—and shakes gently. There's a noise of complaint, then Billy pokes his head out of his cocoon, frowning as he takes in his surroundings. Then his eyes land on Steve and Steve can actually see the exact moment Billy remembers everything. He flinches, shutting his eyes like he can't bear to look at the world around him. He puts a hand over his face, but not before Steve sees him mouth the word: *Fuck*.

Not good.

"Hey." Steve circles the hot plate of eggs around a little, near Billy's face, letting the enticing scent waft over to him. "You hungry?"

Billy opens one eye, regards him suspiciously. His gaze falls to the plate. "...yeah?" he says, like he's waiting for the punchline.

"Good, here," Steve says, handing him the plate and fork and setting a cup of milk down on the side table. He takes a seat with his own food on the air mattress.

Billy gives Steve one last suspicious, slitted look out of the corner of his eye, then tucks into his food, mumbling something under his breath.

“What? I didn’t catch that.”

“I *said*: of all the people in the world, why did it have to be YOU, Harrington?”

Prior to this moment, Steve might have answered: *Because I’m a sucker who can’t say no to a crying kid?* Okay, he still feels the tiniest twinge of an urge to say it now. But he doesn’t say it. Because he can see it, in the hunch of Billy’s shoulders, in the curve of his neck: the shame he’s feeling, the pain his body is still in. And Steve doesn’t care to poke at the meager remains Billy’s of defenses. Doesn’t need to get the upper hand. He just needs to wait him out.

He ignores Billy’s words. “How are you feeling this morning?” then amends, “Make that this afternoon.”

Billy cocks his head. “You seriously that desperate to see my dick again, Harring—”

Steve cuts him off, “*Knock it off.*” He feels bad for the guy, but he’s too tired to start this again.

And, wonder of wonders, Billy does. Steve takes advantage of his silence to continue, “I’m not interested in going around and around with you again. Maybe you didn’t mean it when you said it yesterday, but I did—we’re friends now.” Well, okay, they’re not exactly *friends* friends, but they’re not *enemies* anymore either, so close enough. Steve forges on, “And I look out for my friends. So cut the crap and tell me how you’re feeling this morning. I want to help.”

Billy just stares at him, mouth partially agape.

Steve digs into his food, makes an encouraging motion with his loaded fork before shoveling the bite into his mouth. “Well?” he asks, around a mouthful of egg.

Billy shovels a forkful of his own into his mouth, chews thoughtfully. His voice is quiet when he finally says, “How the fuck do you think



I'm feeling?"

"Pretty shitty," Steve answers honestly. "I think you're feeling sore as hell, probably. But hopefully, not like you're about to die any second. The second day out is way better than the first, at least in my experience, but uh...you're not going to be forgetting that you got nailed in the crotch anytime soon. Especially since we're now out of Percocet. The good news is, I also have Tylenol. And even with the power out, it's not like we're about to run out of ice for the pack anytime soon." He swirls a finger to indicate the whole snowy world outside the house.

"Man, *fuck* your icepack," Billy says. "Fuck *ice*."

"Like, in general?"

"Yes," Billy deadpans.

"...."

"...."

"Okay."

"*Okay*."

The room is silent then, no sound but forks clanking against plates and mouths chewing. Until Billy says, "These are...good." The words are unsure, almost shy. He never looks up from his plate.

"Splash of heavy cream after you crack the eggs," Steve tells him tentatively. Conversationally. "Makes all the difference."

Billy shifts uncomfortably. There's a pause, and then, "I'm sore," he says. "All over, but mainly from my belly button all the way down to my balls." The fingers of his free hand tap out a frenetic rhythm against his thigh.

Wait. Was that actual sincerity? Did Steve actually get through? There's not a trace of venom in Billy's words: no bark, no bite. Just, as far as Steve can tell, hesitant, vulnerable honesty.

"It gets better, I promise," he tells Billy, but he doesn't look convinced. "I'll go get you the Tylenol. And, you know, whatever else you need, man. Just take it easy. No quick movements. Try to stay relaxed; don't tense up. And uh, also, when you go to the bathroom, you should..." *Bad idea!* one nervous corner of his brain screams. *Don't say it!* "You should, uh...sit down like a girl." He shakes his head, a little embarrassed to say the words. But they're out of his mouth now, so he might as well press on.

Billy's looking at him a little dubiously, but he hasn't said anything. Yet.

"It takes the pressure off the, you know..." he points downwards with his finger and whistles, "...downtown situation. Just makes things easier. Trust me."

And after a moment, Billy replies, "Okay." And for a second, that's all he says, and Steve thinks maybe Billy's actually going to leave it alone, take the advice for what it is—

"...expert advice from the expert on cocks." Nope. There it is.

Steve rolls his eyes. Billy looks at him then, finally meets his eyes. Shows his teeth in an expression that almost, *almost* makes it to a real smile. "Oops. Bad habits. Sorry, *friend*."

They eat in silence after that. It's not exactly comfortable, but it's not exactly uncomfortable either. It feels like progress. Steve had fed the fire when he woke, and now the combination of soft winter light streaming through the skylights and the steady crackling of fireplace logs makes the cavernous living room feel close and cozy.

Billy drops his fork onto the empty plate with a *clank*. "Uh, thanks," he says after a pause, dragging the sleeve of his borrowed sweatshirt over his mouth. "I didn't know you could cook." He sounds surprised.

"Yeah...you know, living alone most of the time...you uh, you learn," Steve tells him. Truth is, he likes to cook, and he's pretty good at it.

"I figured your family probably kept a chef or something to do this

type of stuff,” Billy says, looking around him like he’s taking in his surroundings for the first time.

“Nope,” Steve answers, polishing off the rest of his own eggs and motioning for Billy’s plate so he can take them both to the kitchen. “I mean, we have a cleaning lady that comes every other Friday, but that’s it.”

The expression Billy gives him is hard to interpret. He casts lingering looks at the high ceilings and the dark, plush furniture. “Right. So this is how the other half lives, huh?” he finally says.

Steve shrugs, following Billy’s gaze around the room. He’s not ashamed, exactly, of the way he lives, but he gets what other people see when they look at his house. “I guess.”

Billy gives Steve an appraising look. “Aren’t your parents going to be mad about a *friend* of yours bleeding all over their suede couch?”

Steve just shrugs again. “Like they’d notice. They’re never here.”

Billy cocks his head. “What happened? You kill ‘em for the inheritance?”

“What? No!”

Billy rolls his eyes. Gives Steve a weak imitation of his usual smirk. “Relax your ass Harrington, I’m *kidding*.”

“I knew that,” Steve protests.

“Uh huh. So, where are they now? Your parents?”

“Chicago, usually. My dad keeps a condo for when he’s working in the city, and my mom usually stays with him,” Steve says. “But they’re traveling right now. Again. Somewhere in the Mediterranean. Mykonos. Or Malta. I forget. It all runs together after a while.”

“Lucky you,” Billy murmurs. “Big house, all to yourself.”

“I guess,” Steve says, trying to shrug off the subject. But Billy doesn’t miss much.

"You miss 'em?"

"I don't know. I mean, yeah. I miss my mom. Sometimes. Until she's here, trying to shove six months of parenting into two days. Then it's just...weird."

"But not your dad?"

"Eh," Steve says noncommittally.

"You don't get along?"

"Something like that. He's not...he doesn't..."

"Knock you around on the regular?" Billy offers wryly.

"That would require him to be here on the regular," Steve replies. "Nah, he just runs his mouth. A lot. Lets me know what a disappointment I am, how I don't live up to his expectations, shit like that."

Billy raises an eyebrow. "What kind of expectations?"

"You're in my English class, you know. I'm not exactly..." *The best student. The brightest guy. Smart,* his brain helpfully supplies. "...an overachiever. He says I 'lack motivation.'" When Billy doesn't comment, Steve goes on, "But you know, at least I didn't have a kid and then decide I didn't want them."

"Cheers to that," Billy nods and raises his milk in salute. "Fuck that guy."

Steve hesitates a second, surprised, before he raises his own glass. "Cheers," he agrees.

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Hours later, when the sun has started to sink low on the horizon,

turning the light pink and hazy, Billy loudly announces, "I'm so fucking BORED. No way could I live like this all the time." He's starfished out on the couch, staring dully at the ceiling. With the exception of the occasional reluctant bathroom break, he's been on that couch now for a grand total of like, thirty-six hours, and Steve thinks the guy might actually start growing roots soon.

"Me either," Steve agrees from his own spot on the blow-up mattress, where he flips idly through an old issue of Esquire. "Glad I live in the '80s."

"Jesus, tell me about it." Billy sits up all of a sudden, then winces, one hand going protectively to his groin. He settles himself more carefully, and asks, "You gotta deck of cards lying around here anywhere?"

"Yeah, probably a couple of them," Steve answers.

"Well what are you waiting for? Break 'em out! Let's play!"

"Seriously?"

"You got any better ideas?"

He's got a point.

They end up on opposite ends of the air mattress, Billy holding the cards. He riffle shuffles them down into a bridge, spreads the newly shuffled deck into a fan, uses the last card to flip the fan, gathers them up, makes the cards spring, in a clicking cascade, from one hand to the other, then does the riffle shuffle/bridge combo one last time.

He's obviously showing off, and usually Steve would find that obnoxious, but right now he can't help but laugh, surprised and delighted. "What, you moonlight in Atlantic City on the weekends or something?"

Billy smiles, a real, genuine smile, the first one Steve has ever seen on his face. "Nah, a friend taught me how."

"Someone here taught you how to do that?" Steve asks, incredulous.

The smile wilts right back off of Billy's face, as fast as it appeared. "No. Someone from back home." He shakes his head, starts dealing the cards back and forth. "Okay. There's only two of us, so let's say... Seven Card Stud, deuces wild."

"Alright..." Steve agrees. "But uh, what's 'Seven Card Stud?'"

Billy slaps his palm against his forehead. "Aw, you're killing me, Harrington! I really am stranded in Hicksville, huh?"

"Yeah, because insulting the town is helpful," Steve says.

"It's a type of poker, man. Like...Five Card Draw, Omaha Hi-lo, Follow the Queen...any of this ringing a bell?"

Steve shrugs, "I *know* what poker is—I can play Five Card Draw. I'm just not a freaking card shark, unlike you, apparently."

Billy yawns. "We're not playing Five Card Draw. It's too boring, and it'll be worse with just two people. What else do you know how to play?"

"I...used to play Rummy and Spoons with my cousins at the lake, when we went to visit in the summer."

"Spoons is for kids," Billy scoffs. "And I hate Rummy—all that keeping score bullshit. What else?"

"Go...Fish?"

Billy snorts by way of an answer.

"I don't know, that's all I've got, man."

"Fine," Billy tells him. "Then I'll just have to teach you to play something else. Let's play...Egyptian Rat Screw."

"Egyptian Rat Screw? Really?" Steve's skeptical.

"It's great, you'll love it, trust me. So here's the thing: I deal out the deck until it's split between us, then we each take turns flipping up cards into a pile in the center, until someone flips up a face card.

THEN things get fun.”

Steve listens avidly to Billy’s explanation of the rules. Thinks he’s got it. It sounds fun, and fairly simple. There’s one part he’s not too sure about though...

“So what happens if I accidentally slap your hand when I’m trying to slap a card?” he asks. “Or vice versa?”

Billy shrugs with a half grin. “There is no accidentally to it. Slapping’s half the fun.”

Steve shakes his head but doesn’t back out. “If you say so, man...”

“I’m serious! It’s fun! It just sucks there’s nothing to bet with.”

“Uh, yeah there is,” Steve says.

“Oh please, pretty boy. I’d clean you out, and we both know it. You know what, on second thought...”

Steve rolls his eyes. “Not money, man. Like, something else. We could play for cigarettes—if I *had* cigarettes—or candy, or, or...”

“Or secrets.” Billy’s eyes light up.

“Secrets? How does that work?”

“Like, whoever wins each game gets to ask the loser any question they want, and the person who loses has to answer truthfully.”

“What’s to keep one of us from lying, if we don’t like the question?”

“Your word as a man! And also the knowledge that you’re a total pussy if you punk out,” Billy smirks, his eyes taunting Steve like that day on the basketball court, right before everything with Nancy came tumbling down. “What do you say?”

*Plant your feet.*

“I say bring it,” Steve shoots back. He holds his hand out. “Shake on it, like men.”

Billy hesitates for a second, then puts his hand in Steve's. His hand is hot, not just warm, but *hot*, and Steve half expects him to turn this into a display of dominance, tighten his grip until the bones of Steve's hand grind together. But he just returns the shake firmly, eyes never leaving Steve's.

"Hope you're prepared to reveal all, Harrington."

"Ready if you are."

They face each other, both sitting cross-legged. Even though it's still light outside (barely), the sinking winter sun doesn't do much more than cast the room in silvery shadows, so they end up playing by the light of the fire. Billy does his elaborate shuffle thing again, and deals their cards.

Steve wins the first round, and starts out easy, asks Billy his favorite color (blue, shocker). And then he proceeds to get his ass handed to him in the next two rounds.

Billy pulls no punches, not even on his first question. He appraises Steve a long minute before saying, "Everyone knows your ex cheated on you with that freak who's always carrying a camera around."

Steve glowers at him. Of course. *Of course* he'd go there. "I didn't actually hear a question in there."

"That's because I'm not finished—the whole school knows she cheated on you, but you still sit with her and her new boyfriend at lunch every day. Why?" He doesn't look cruel when he asks, just... curious and a little amused. It still pisses Steve off.

"Because she didn't cheat on me," Steve shoots back. "I know the timing was off, but we were over by the time she and Jonathan hooked up."

"That doesn't answer my question. Why do you still hang out with them? Put it this way: if it were me, I might get close to them again, but only so I could put my fist through his nose. And I sure as shit wouldn't be hanging out with them."

Steve shrugs. The question makes him feel tired. It's not like everyone



else at school isn't thinking the same thing, it's just...complicated. He says so. "...but at the end of the day, Nancy's my friend. And Jonathan is too. Sort of. We've...been through a lot together. Is it hard to watch *them* together? Yeah, sometimes." *All of the time.* "But..."

"But?"

Steve shakes his head. "I don't know man. I don't know what to tell you. There's history there I can't explain. They both matter to me. And I'd rather be friends than nothing at all."

"You've got a weird standard for what makes a 'friend,' Harrington." Then Billy licks his bottom lip and smiles lasciviously, like something's just occurred to him. "Don't tell me you've had like...a threesome with them or something."

It startles a laugh out of Steve. "Last time I checked, you've only won one round. But that's two questions," he says.

Billy grins back. "Touché, amigo." And then proceeds to win the next round too. "Have you had a threesome with the princess and the freak?"

Steve hesitates like he's nervous, letting the suspense build. He leans forward, watches with satisfaction as Billy leans in too, then says, "...No." He kills himself laughing at the put-out look on Billy's face.

When he wins the next round, he uses his turn to ask, "Speaking of threesomes, there's a rumor about you and Becky and Amy. Is it true?"

"Nope," Billy pops the "p", managing to make one word sound so smug. "I've had them both, but not at one time. But it *was* in the same night, so I could see how people got the wrong idea."

Steve shakes his head, fighting off the smile that's attempting to tip the corners of his mouth up. "Jesus, dude."

"Oh come on, don't tell me you haven't done the same!" Billy challenges, dealing as he speaks. "They used to call you *King Steve*. Had to be a reason for it."

Steve winces. "Don't remind me."

Steve's expecting it then, when Billy wins the next hand and asks, "Do you miss it? Being the King?"

Steve doesn't hesitate. "Not even a little." He sounds so certain, he almost believes himself.

"Why not?"

"One question per win, those were your rules, not mine."

"Oh come on Harrington! I just gave you like, three answers for free!"

"Fine," Steve gives in. "You go to Hawkins. You know what it's like. Is it that great, being King?"

"So you did it because...what? There was nothing better to do?" Billy says.

"I don't know, isn't that why you do it now?"

"It's not your turn to ask questions, Harrington."

"Fine. It was sort of because there was nothing better to do. Sort of because I liked it. Sort of because I just never realized there might be other options. But...things change. I stopped liking it. The end."

"I'd rather be at the top of the pile than on the bottom," Billy replies, but Steve just shakes his head. He picks the deck up, starts shuffling. He's no Billy Hargrove, but he can do a riffle. "That's enough free answers," he says. "My turn."

It's *not* his turn, turns out. Even though Steve's shuffling now, Billy's winning streak continues. When he leans forward the next time around, a slow smile curving his lips, Steve knows it's going to be bad.

"So Harrington, tell me..." Looks like Billy's the one drawing out the suspense this time. "Since you *haven't* had a threesome, what's the most sexually deviant thing you ever did when you were *the King*?"

Steve groans. "I'm not drunk enough for this."

In the firelight, Billy's all copper and gold, all mischief and glee. "Who's stopping you?"

Steve doesn't reply, just shakes his head and walks out, clocking the dismay on Billy's face as he leaves and smiling just a little once he passes him.

He raids the wine rack in the back of the big butler's pantry and returns triumphant, a bottle of wine in each hand and a corkscrew tucked between two free fingers. Amusement replaces the look of disappointment on Billy's face. "Pick your poison," Steve says as he sits down and goes to work popping the cork on the first bottle. "Red or white?"

"White," Billy says.

Steve is surprised. He doesn't imagine Hargrove drinks a lot of wine, but for some reason, he still would have figured him for a red kind of guy. He opens his mouth to say so, but what comes out is, "White. Yeah, no shit."

"No," Billy says, serious again all of a sudden.

Problem is, now that Steve's said it, he's not ready to let it go. "Seriously though, man, what's your problem with Lucas?"

"What's that thing you keep reminding me?" Billy pretends to think about it for a minute. "Oh yeah! No free questions." He takes the bottle from Steve and knocks back a slug. "Still my turn."

*Ugh.* Steve was hoping he'd forgotten, but nope, Billy plows right ahead, repeating his earlier question. "What's the most sexually deviant thing you've ever done, King Steve?"

"Christ. Okay fine, here it is." Steve takes a long chug of his own wine, wipes his sleeve across his mouth, looks Billy dead in the face and enunciates, "I fucked Carol."

"I hate to tell you, bub...but that's not exactly deviant. *Everyone's* fucked Car—"

“While Tommy watched,” Steve finishes. He’s not proud of it, exactly, and he’s never thought it was cool to kiss and tell, but a part of him revels in the way Billy’s eyes go comically round.

“No *fucking* way!” he exclaims.

Steve just nods. “Uh huh, way.”

“Holy shit, Harrington! Where?” Billy gasps. Steve opens his mouth to remind him of the rules, but Billy heads him off. “Noooo, don’t tell me that’s two questions. It’s still part of the first one—doesn’t count unless you give me details!”

Steve glances over once at the couch, then back at Billy’s face. But Billy keeps staring at him blankly, so he does it again, adds a telling little lift of his eyebrows this time. Watches Billy whip his head around to do the same, sees the understanding dawn on his face. Billy looks back at him, blinks twice, then lets loose a howl of laughter. “Holy shit, Harrington! And you let me SLEEP THERE?” he whoops.

“Well it’s not like it happened last week,” Steve says, unable to hold back a grin any longer.

Billy falls backwards on the mattress as he loses it, grabbing his stomach and tucking the other hand protectively between his legs. “Stop! Stop making me laugh, I’m dying, ow ow, holy shit.” He wipes away tears of mirth as he struggles to push back into a sitting position, still laughing weakly. “No, I take it back. Fuck it, tell me everything. At least I’ll die happy.”

And Steve does. Tells him the whole damn story (after a few more hefty pulls from his bottle). He really shouldn’t, he knows. It’s bad form, and they’d all sworn they’d never talk about it afterwards, and even if Tommy IS a dick, it’s not really fair to Carol, but...he doesn’t care. Not when it makes Billy Hargrove smile like that—so his whole face lights up. It’s not the spiteful, smirking expression Steve is so familiar with. There’s no menace here, no cruel intent. Just pure, unfettered, bright-eyed, ear-to-ear *delight*. Steve could get a little addicted to making Billy Hargrove laugh like that.

They keep playing, and Billy keeps winning, but Steve doesn’t even

mind (well, mostly), even though Hargrove seems to get a kick out of making him blush with questions of the ridiculous and the lewd varieties.

“If you could bang anyone who ever lived, who would it be?”

Steve doesn’t even have to think about it. “Farrah Fawcett.” Billy nods, deeming his answer acceptable.

“Who starred in little Steve Harrington’s first ever wet dream?” The answer here is *also* Farrah Fawcett. Billy is less amused this time around.

He ups the ante. “Who’s the best lay at Hawkins High?”

Steve sighs. Shakes his head like he’s disappointed in Billy’s lack of knowledge. “Me, obviously.”

Billy narrows his eyes. “That’s not what I meant!” But he’s suppressing a laugh, Steve can tell, so he just shrugs, and says faux-innocently, “Too bad, you should have been more specific.”

It’s only then he realizes that he’s backed himself into a corner, because Billy’s going to ask him which *girl* is the best lay at Hawkins High next, and he *really* doesn’t want to answer that one. Doesn’t want to answer honestly and have to hear flack when he tells Billy a name that *isn’t* Nancy’s. Also doesn’t want to lie and say it *was* Nancy either, because he doesn’t like talking about their relationship to anyone, but especially not Billy.

So, the next time, when Billy says, “So how old was the best lay at Hawkins High when he lost his virginity?” Steve’s surprised. And relieved. “Fifteen,” he answers truthfully.

So (of course) the next time around, Billy asks, “How long did you last, your first time?”

Steve rolls his eyes, feeling the beginnings of a flush. “I don’t know, like, half a minute? I wasn’t exactly using a stopwatch. Oh stop smirking asshole, I didn’t say I was the best back then. Just that I’m... the best now.”

Billy just smirks, looking way too pleased with himself. "Sure. Whatever you say, your highness."

"Well how long did *YOU* last, your first time?" Steve knows it's a mistake before he's even finished the sentence. You never show weakness when another guy already thinks he's got you on the ropes.

And of course, Billy just chuckles and shakes his head. "Win the next round and find out."

He pushes his advantage when, of course, Steve doesn't win the next round. "What's your favorite sex position?"

He's clearly trying to get Steve flustered again, and Steve's glad they're sitting so close to the fire. At least Steve can blame the heat for the color he feels rising in his face. "Um," he answers noncommittally, trying not to squirm.

By now Billy looks like the cat that ate the canary. "Aw, come on amigo, big expert like you, it shouldn't be that hard to answer," he teases. He pretends to think for a moment. "Hmmm...is it the missionary position? That's it, isn't it? You're totally a missionary kind of guy, all staring *deeply* into her eyes while you thrust gently and recite poetry and stroke her hair...come on, admit it."

He's not. A missionary kind of guy. Or well, he *is*, because Steve likes sex in *any* position, but that one's not his favorite. He bites his lip, trying to figure out how to say it in a way that won't sound dumb. It's just...Billy's so *intent*, with the way he watches Steve, studying every expression, every word, looking for something. Weakness, probably.

He lifts his eyebrows as if to say, *Well?*

So Steve says finally, "I like it when...when she sits on me."

"So you mean you like it when she's on top."

"No, I mean, kinda, but like...when I'm on a chair or sitting up in bed, and she's in my lap. And you know, you're all...body-to-body, can't get any closer, and her breasts are so soft where they're pressed against your chest, and her body's so hot against yours, and she's ALL

the way down, and you can't get any deeper, and she can just kind of...*work* her hips around on you. Or you can lift her up off your cock and bring her back down so it feels even deeper, and you can feel every sound she makes through your skin, and it's so *fucking* good? I mean, I'll take it any way I can get it, but...that's the way I like it best."

There's a pause. Billy's expression is unreadable. Is he going to tease Steve some more? Is he going to laugh? Steve waits for a response, and finally Billy swallows and says, "Oh. Y-yeah, I get that." Then he just starts dealing out the cards for the next round. If Steve didn't know any better, and if they weren't so near the fire, he'd say it looked like Billy might be blushing too.

Then Steve wins the next round.

By the time it happens, they've both finished their bottles, so Steve makes a trip to the pantry before he asks his question, bringing back two bottles of Chardonnay this time, because Steve prefers it over the red too.

Maybe it's all the wine that loosens Steve's tongue, because he just means to give Billy a dose of his own medicine—*what's the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to you with a girl, Hargrove?*—but he looks at Billy chugging the bottle of wine—*white*—and when he opens his mouth, what comes out instead is, "So why do you hate Lucas so much?"

The easy grin he'd been wearing for the better part of an hour slides right off Billy's face. He lifts his bottle up again and takes another deep, cavalier pull. Then he sets it between his legs and looks down at the mattress between them for a long moment before saying quietly, "Why do you think?"

"Is it..." It pains him to say it. He's kinda been having fun, actually enjoying Billy's company even, and he doesn't want to hear the answer he thinks he knows is coming. But he needs to know. He *needs to know*. He clears throat and tries again. "It's because he's black, isn't it?"

When Billy lifts his head, the look he shoots him is so hotly indignant

Steve leans back a little. “NO, it’s not because he’s black!”

“O...*kay*?” The word sounds dubious to Steve’s own ears.

Billy looks down again, scratches roughly at the back of his head. “I mean, it’s not...not really, but—shit, I don’t know man. I guess I can fucking see how you’d get there.” He’s never seen the guy look less than one hundred percent confident in what he’s saying, but now, he looks...lost.

“Wait, so...it is, or it isn’t? Because he’s black, I mean.” Because now Steve is really confused.

Billy closes his eyes, and when he speaks, he does so slowly, grinding the words out. “I don’t...hate him...because he’s black...exactly. I hate him because...Maxine is with him...and he’s black. I don’t fucking know, man.”

“So you don’t have a problem with black people, as long as your sister isn’t dating them?” Steve is starting to feel sick, and it isn’t the wine.

“NO! You’re not listening!”

“I’m hearing you loud and clear, buddy,” Steve says, feeling his blood pressure start to rise. “If there’s something I’m missing, it’s because you’re not telling me. So if you want me to hear something else, explain it better.” Steve really needs him to, or he won’t even be able to look at Billy the rest of the...however long they’re snowed in together. Stupidly, he’d almost let himself forget about the stuff with Billy and Lucas there for a minute, but now that it’s out in the open, he can’t...get past it. Can’t un-think it.

Billy fists a hand in his hair. “I don’t. Hate the kid. Because he’s black. I don’t have a problem with Max dating someone who’s black. I don’t. But my dad does. Or he should. Not *should*—” Billy presses his lips together, shakes his head. It’s like he’s only now trying to put the pieces together for himself.

“The thing you gotta understand is that Neil hates anyone who’s different than him. Anyone who doesn’t look like him, doesn’t act



like him, doesn't THINK like him. All my life, he's been a hateful fucking bastard—a real *dick*—about everything when it comes to me: how I looked, what I wore, the music I listened to, the way I talked, who my friends were, where I went, what I said, how I *thought*. And then he makes us move here because...because he's a miserable son of a bitch who fucking has to control EVERYTHING. If I read poetry, I'm a fairy. If I use hairspray, I'm a *fag*. But if I go out with a chick, she's a *whore*. If I step one fucking toe out of line, I'm a useless *fuck-up*. But then Maxine starts dating a black guy, and I *know* how Neil is, I KNOW HIM, Harrington. And I knew he'd have a problem with it, and I told her she couldn't, and then...just...fucking nothing. He doesn't react, doesn't say one fucking word. And I can't tell if he's biding his time, winding up for a perfect fucking swing or or...if he just doesn't care at all. Because it's perfect fucking Maxine, who can do no wrong, whereas if it was me, he'd bust my skull in. I say this from experience, not in the hypothetical."

"You know that's kind of fucked up, right?" Steve says.

"Yes, Harrington," Billy points at his bruised face, "I haven't exactly forgotten how fucked up my old man is."

"No—I mean, yeah," Steve shakes his head, "Yeah, your dad is an asshole, total douchebag. No arguments there. No one should do what he does to you. But...I mean that it's fucked up that you terrified a kid because...just because..."

Billy's mean smirk is back. "Because I'm mad that Maxine gets to be happy, and I don't? Yeah, that's me." He throws his arms wide, showing teeth. "I'm a fucked up kind of guy, Harrington!"

Steve sighs. That's not what he meant. Was it? "Nah man...it's fucked up that you know that shit's wrong but you pay it forward anyway."

"Well we can't all be champions of the downtrodden like you, Harrington."

"That's NOT what I said."

"No, no, no, I get it. See, what I really want to know is: why is a *great* guy like you so busy trying to help out a piece of shit like me? And

don't give me some bullshit about not leaving me to die in the snow for Max. You could have dumped me back where you found me when I asked you to yesterday, and NO ONE would have cared. So tell me, why is Hawkins's very own defender of wayward youth helping me out when I'm such a DANGER to all those brats that follow you around like the Pied fucking Piper? You got an ulterior motive? Or do you just like being the patron saint of lost *fucking* causes?"

"Yeah I'm pretty sure that's actually Saint Jude..."

"ANSWER ME!" Billy yells, practically in his face, startling him. Steve can see his hands are clenched into white-knuckled fists in his lap.

Defiance rises in Steve, white hot and blazing. He's not scared of Billy Hargrove anymore. He can admit that he was before, now that he's beyond it. "You want an answer? Fine. EARN IT." He grabs the cards and starts dealing, slapping them down so hard that the mattress bounces with each card he lays down.

Billy snatches his cards up. "*Fine*," He growls through his teeth.

What follows is the angriest, most silent rounds of cards ever played. Which, of course, Steve wins. Then he wins the next one. And the one after that. Four in all. He doesn't even bother coming up with new questions, just starts throwing Billy's own back at him.

"If you could have sex with anyone who ever lived, who would it be?"

Billy's mouth is a flat line when he answers, "Shauna Grant. Deal."

"Who was your first wet dream about?"

"Neil's ex-girlfriend Bonnie. She was blonde with big tits. *Deal*." He spits out.

"Who's the best lay at Hawkins High?"

Billy gives him that old, familiar frostbite smile. "Let's just say I haven't been impressed so far. Deal."

Steve doesn't even bothering phrasing the next one as a question.

“Favorite sex position.”

“Doggy style. That way I don’t have to look at the bitch’s *face*. Fucking deal.”

Then, on the fifth hand, Billy finally wins. “Why are you doing this?” he snarls, voice low and dangerous.

“Doing. What?” Steve knows he’s playing with fire, but...he needs Billy to say the words. Needs Billy to *hear* them.

“Pretending to be my ‘*friend*.’” It’s said so mockingly. Billy actually does the air quotes.

“Because...” The word hangs in the air between them while Steve gropes helplessly for the right words. Finally he gestures back and forth between them. “Because I want to believe in second chances. Because I *need* to.”

Billy wrinkles his nose. “What does a guy like you *\*need\** to believe in second chances for? Wait, wait, let me guess. You missed a merit badge in Boy Scouts? Or you uh, you didn’t help an old lady across the street one time, you bad boy, you. No, no, I got it: someone sneezed, and you forgot to say ‘bless you.’ That’s it, right? My God, Harrington, how do you *stand* the guilt?”

Steve feels his lips compress into a flat line. “No. It’s because I hurt people.”

“Oh, how sad for you. Am I supposed to care? Maybe you’ve forgotten—I eat innocent little kiddies for breakfast. Not to mention what I do to pretty boys with trust funds.” Billy licks his tongue out, grinning that mean, hungry grin of his. It’s amazing how one small silly gesture can look so threatening, on the right person. It’s like hearing a rattlesnake’s tail.

But Steve’s past caring.

“Yeah? Have you ever gotten anyone killed?” To his horror, his eyes begin to sting.

Billy stops sneering. Frowns. “You’re serious. Who?”

“Her name was Barb. Barbara Holland. She died last year. You’ve heard about it, right?”

“The redhead with the glasses? The one with the memorial in the trophy case?”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

Billy’s quiet for a long time. The only sound in the room is the crackling of the dying fire. Then he says, “Everyone at school thinks she died in some sort of chemical spill.”

Steve swallows. He’s had a lot of time to think about it, on his own, these last few months, but he’s never said these words to anyone. “Because that’s the official story. Because the *officials* don’t want anyone to know the truth. But she was *taken*, and then she was killed. From a party. At my house.

“She came with Nancy. Because they were best friends. And she was the odd one out. Because she wasn’t gorgeous like Nancy, or an asshole like me, or Tommy, or Carol. So while Nancy and I were upstairs having sex, Barb got taken. Because she was alone. Because we left her alone. Because I cared more about taking Nancy’s virginity, and Nancy cared more about...I don’t know man, maybe she was just starry-eyed for fucking \*King Steve.\* But we sent her off alone, and she got killed because of us. Because of me. So yeah, maybe I know more about being a piece of shit than you think. Oh, and when Nancy wanted to come forward and tell Barb’s parents what we knew? I told her not to. Because I was scared. Because I was too worried about covering my own ass. So, if we’re competing, I guess I win the gold in the asshole Olympics.” Steve scrubs a sleeve across his face, rubs hard at his leaking nose. When he looks over at Billy, the other boy is gaping at him.

There’s not really much to say after that. Steve stands, gathering the empty bottles of wine and taking them to the kitchen. Outside the ring of warmth cast by the fire, the temperature in the house has dropped even further. When he comes back to the living room, Billy hasn’t moved from his spot. Steve turns his back to him, starts feeding more logs onto the fire. “I’m tired now. I’m going to sleep,” he says. Billy doesn’t respond, but the mattress rustles as he moves

off of it.

The adrenaline from their almost-fight has burned off all the alcohol in Steve's system, leaving him feeling simultaneously heavy and empty, clear-headed but adrift. He feels no regret that he told Billy the truth, nor any fear about what Billy will do with that knowledge. He just wants to not have to think about all the things. He just wants to sleep.

Steve's lying on his side, nearly out, when the mattress jostles and there's a sudden cold draft against his back. He surges into a half-sitting position, looking over his shoulder, and...Billy Hargrove is climbing into bed with him.

He avoids Steve's eyes, lying on his side so his back is to Steve. "The couch is too fucking far from the fireplace," he says by way of explanation. "I'm cold."

"Whatever," Steve says. There's a large gap of space between their bodies, and no reason to feel nervous. None at all. Just two (maybe) former enemies, sharing a bed near the fire so neither one of them freezes in their sleep. He lies back down on his own side of the mattress, facing the other way, and tries to relax.

"And no funny business!" comes from the other side of the mattress.

"Oh for fuck's..." Steve thrashes around, struggling to turn over to face the idiot lying beside him. Every time he shifts, the mattress bounces Billy's body in response. It might be funny if the whole thing wasn't so goddamn stupid. "You know I'm not actually gay, right?"

Billy looks over his shoulder at him, squinting like an angry tomcat. "I'm just saying—"

"No, I get what you're just saying—now you get what I'm saying: I. Do not want. To jump your bones. Tonight or any other!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

They both turn away, back to their respective sides, the mattress

bouncing as if it's agitated, too.

"And no snoring!" Billy adds.

\*\*\*

Steve wakes with a scream lodged in his throat. He doesn't remember what he was dreaming. Just that it was dark, and cold, and he was alone. And he couldn't breathe. Even though he knows he's awake, *knows* his eyes are open now, he feels like he's still back *there*, wherever there was. He scoots as close to the fire as he can get without actually crawling up onto the hearth. His breath whistles in his throat, and he shakes so hard he thinks his body might just come apart. The air won't come. There is no air. He can't find it. He can't breathe! It just—it won't—

There's a hand rubbing briskly between his shoulder blades. "Breathe, Harrington. Breathe."

"I *can't*!" he gasps out.

"Yes, you can, just stop trying to talk. You don't have asthma do you?"

Steve shakes his head.

"Good, good. Then you can breathe. Just let it happen. Relax, and let it come. Try counting backwards from a thousand in your head." Billy—Steve realizes now that it's Billy—continues to rub his hand back and forth between his shoulder blades. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Steve presses his hands hard against the end of the hearth where the mattress butts up against it, and focuses on the motions of Billy's hand against his back, solid and grounding. *Left, right. Left, right. Left, right.*

It takes a while but eventually his heart slows, and, his throat opens up and it doesn't feel like he's breathing through a straw. The urge to flee to his bathroom (and the comfort that resides there) flutters low

in his belly, but it's milder than usual, and even it fades eventually, when he doesn't heed the siren song. He pushes his hair out of his face, and whispers, "*Fuck.*" His face is wet, and he's not sure if it's sweat, or something else.

Billy's motions slow, and his hand trails down to Steve's mid-back, then falls off entirely. "What the hell happened to you, Harrington?" It's not accusatory. Not amused at his distress, like he would have imagined. It's just...dismayed.

Steve can't bring himself to answer.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Yes, Egyptian Ratscrew is a real card game (and a fun one!). Easy directions for play can be found on Youtube. Also, did I mention this fic is a slow burn?  
\*whistles innocently\*

I'm LaVeraceVia on Tumblr. I love questions, so DM me or hit up my ask box if you have any!

\*\*CW for: panic attacks, PTSD, and discussions re: racism. Also, there are foundations laid in this chapter for some unhealthy coping mechanisms that, while not shown in this chapter, will appear in later chapters. If you have any questions, please feel free to message me on Tumblr.

Special thanks to maAdMax, womenseemwicked, wasting-time-again, and yolo-contendre for suggesting dirty questions for Billy to ask!

Kudos and comments are <3!

## 6. When You Scream

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Alright, just fucking say it,” he tells Billy flatly.

“Say what?” Billy asks, but oh, he knows. Steve can see it in his eyes, in the way he’s carefully regarding Steve. There’s no mirth that Steve can detect, no cruelty—yet—but it’s coming, he knows. He’s positive.

*...Or is he?*

*In which, weed is smoked, fortunes are told, and Billy reads Shakespeare.*

*You read that right: Shakespeare. But you’ve trusted me this far, right? ;)*

### Notes for the Chapter:

Listen. I’m sorry? Because not only do I reference a couple Shakespearean sonnets, I managed to throw in some Mark Twain too. My useless English degree just rocked up on me like, “Suuupppppp?” \*smarmy finger guns in my direction\* “Remember meee?”

It’s just...the two of them refused to fall into bed together until Billy read Shakespeare! /facepalm  
Yeah, I don’t even know, you guys.

On the upside, there's also palm reading, which is



wayyy more fun than Shakespeare (and nearly just as gay)!

**\*\*Pro tip:** If you hate Shakespeare as much as Steve does, you can totally skip the parts in italics and just read the dialogue before and after.

Later that night, Steve wakes a second time. This time, there's no terror or panic, no dread certainty that he's about to die. He just wakes easy, feeling safe and comfortable...*comforted*, even. He snuggles down deeper into the covers, luxuriating in the sensation of cozy warmth, shivering contentedly. Then someone shifts behind him, murmuring in their sleep, and Steve's eyes fly open, body going stock-still.

Billy. It's Billy Hargrove. Billy Hargrove is *in bed* with him, and they're pressed *against each other*, not spooning (*thank God*) but still pressed together, back-to-back. Tightly. Which means they're also pressed butt-to-butt, thigh-to-thigh, calf-to-calf even. One of Steve's feet is actually hooked around Billy's ankle, tangled between his feet. Billy's body is *hot*; the pure heat coming off of him sends a rush of chills down Steve's body. It's like sleeping next to a space heater. It feels...good. But embarrassing. And also *weird*.

He tries to hold as still as he can, tries to make sure he doesn't even breathe too hard. He doesn't want to wake Billy up, all too aware of the *I'm not gay, Harrington!* meltdown that would be sure to follow. And then...and then...

And then he must have fallen back asleep, because the next time he opens his eyes it's light outside. And he's *still* pressed back-to-back with Billy Hargrove.

Who is now slapping determinedly at Steve's hip and side.

"Harrington. Harrington. *Hey*, Harrington! Wake up!" He doesn't actually sound that pissed off though. More...amused?

"*Hnnnngh?*" Steve responds eloquently. Like he said, he's never really been good with mornings.

“Wake up, Harrington. I’m hungry!” Billy says jovially.

“S too bad. ‘M not your maid,” Steve mumbles, trying to roll away.

Which of course Billy takes as his cue to stop slapping and start poking. “Come on, pretty boy! Up!”

“*Ugh*...just give me like, five more minutes,” Steve appeals, smashing his face into the pillow.

“And I’m not *your* mom. Up! Now!” Billy punctuates the last word with a particularly accurate jab into the sensitive area just below his ribs.

“Oh my god, FINE!” Steve kicks the covers off, secretly enjoying the sound of Billy’s startled yelp. If Steve’s gonna be cold for the sake of food, then Billy can be too. *Jerk*. “We’ll both get up!”

“But I’m *injured*, Harrington,” Billy whines. “What happened to the guy that brought me breakfast yesterday?”

“That guy slept in until noon,” Steve retorts. “This one’s on you, pal. Get up. You can sit at the counter while I cook.”

“Whatever you say, Chef.” The satisfied tone in Billy’s voice grates, and Steve slouches off to the kitchen, refusing to look his way.

He makes them grilled cheese sandwiches in a griddle pan on the stovetop, thankful that his mom had *insisted* on having a gas range (that she would never, ever use) installed when they renovated a couple of years ago. His dad had bitched endlessly about the cost, but it’s practically a lifesaver with the power out.

Dread builds in Steve as he stands there cooking, involuntarily stiffening the muscles along his spine. All he can think about is how stupid, how *ridiculous* he must have looked last night. And he can *feel* Billy’s stare against his back. This is what he’d been afraid of, Billy Hargrove seeing him like...like he was last night. Weak. Messy. Raw. Billy Hargrove had gotten to watch Steve *break* and now the humiliation of it all threatens to squeeze the air from Steve’s lungs.

Wordlessly, he drops Billy's sandwich on a plate and none too gently sends it sliding down the counter to him. Then with a grunt, he flops down in the other chair to tuck into his own.

"Someone really hates mornings, huh?" Billy asks around a mouthful of food. Steve can actually *hear* him smirking.

Steve ignores him.

"You know, some us were never given the luxury of sleeping in for as long as we want," Billy says.

"And SOME of us don't make assumptions about other people's lives that we know nothing about," Steve shoots back, then thinks about it and tacks on, "Asshole," for good measure.

Billy's laugh is a rowdy, belly-deep thing. "*There's* that fire again! You know, I like it. You should let it show more often."

He glances over at Billy, who's looking back at him, giving Steve an easy grin. Steve doesn't return the expression.

"Alright, just fucking say it," he tells Billy flatly.

"Say what?" Billy asks, but oh, he knows. Steve can see it in his eyes, in the way he's carefully regarding Steve. There's no mirth that Steve can detect, no cruelty—*yet*—but it's coming, he knows. He's positive.

"Whatever it is you have to say about last night. Whatever nasty, mocking little digs you're sitting on. Let's hear it. Come on!" Steve braces himself.

But Billy just takes another bite of his sandwich and chews, looking thoughtful, before he shrugs and says, "No idea what you're talking about, amigo."

"Fine, fucking whatever." Steve pushes his plate away and shoves his barstool back from the counter, walking away.

"Hey. Wait! Dammit Harrington, I said wait!" He hears the legs of Billy's own barstool scrape against the hardwood behind him, then the nearly simultaneous sounds of feet hitting the floor and Billy

crying out. When he turns back, Billy's doubled over, bracing himself against the counter, clearly in pain.

"What's wrong? What'd you do?" he asks.

Billy groans through his teeth, pounding his fist against the countertop. "*Fffffffuckkkk!*" he hisses.

"Shit, you okay?" Steve asks again, moving closer.

"No, I'm not fucking okay, Harrington! My balls are still sore as shit, and I just slid down off a barstool to chase after you, because you're running away like a whiny little bitch, when I didn't even *do* anything!" Billy growls, still doubled over.

Steve winces. "Oh. Shit." Silence hangs heavy in the air between them. Finally Steve offers, "Do you need any—"

"No!" Billy snaps, face still frozen in a flinch, his eyes shut. "I do not need anything! Except for you to get back over here, sit your ass down, and finish your goddamn sandwich!"

Hesitant, Steve returns. But instead of sitting, he wavers beside his chair. Could...could he really have gotten it wrong? Is Billy really going to let it go, like Steve *didn't* just give him years of ammunition?

Carefully, the other boy straightens, breathing slowly and deliberately through his nose.

"You're sure you don't..." Steve starts to ask, letting the question trail off when Billy looks at him, shaking his head.

"Jesus Christ, Harrington, *sit*. I flashed you the whole fucking enchilada two days ago when *I* was freaking out. I'm not gonna laugh at you for having a nightmare. *Chill.*"

Steve sits. Still, he can't help but ask, "Seriously?"

"I mean, I'm not gonna braid your hair or paint your nails anytime soon, but I'm not gonna give you shit either. 'Least, not about last night. *Seriously.*"

“Oh. That’s uh...thanks. I mean—thanks, man. That’s...really cool.” Steve eats his sandwich in a state of mild wonder. Billy Hargrove just said something *nice*. Well, nice-ish. Steve wouldn’t believe it if it hadn’t happened to him.

“Tylenol,” Billy mutters a little later, gingerly stepping down from his seat when they’re finished. At Steve’s questioning look, he says, “You know how you asked if I needed anything? Tylenol. I’ll be right behind you, soon as I can remember how to *walk* again.”

“Whatever you need, man.”

Steve hands Billy the whole bottle when he comes limping into the living room a minute later. The other boy shakes out four, swallowing them dry, then takes a careful seat on the couch.

Steve starts, cautiously, “How’s the...everything?”

“You mean how are my bruised dick and balls doing?” Billy offers wryly.

It startles a laugh out of Steve. “I mean: how are *you* doing? Like, in general? And yeah, that too.” He studies the other boy. It’s been two and a half days since Steve first found him (damn, has it really only been two and a half days?), and Billy’s face is still a scabbed, bruised mess, but the swelling seems to be going down already. Steve knows from his explorations that first night that Billy’s abdomen and hips are peppered in ugly bruises, but amazingly, Billy’s been able to move and breathe without much difficulty. He’s gotta be one hell of a fast healer. The guy might be a major shit most of the time, but he’s also a majorly *tough* shit. Which might be impressive, but...it isn’t necessarily a good thing. He shouldn’t have to be.

“I should have asked you first thing, right after we woke up,” Steve says, by way of apology.

“Put it this way: I don’t feel like I want to die every time I sit down, or stand up, or take a piss. So that’s progress,” Billy answers.

“That’s *definitely* progress,” Steve agrees.

“So what do you *do* in this big house, all by yourself?”

“Huh?”

Billy idly twirls a finger to indicate the space around them. “All this. What do you *do*?”

It’s a fairly innocuous question, but something about the words makes Steve feel defensive, for reasons he can’t explain. “What do you mean, what do I do? I live here.”

“*Yeah*, but what do you *DO*? Big house, no nagging parents, no annoying siblings. If it were me, I’d be throwing a rager every weekend. I’d have a bitch warming my bed every night.”

“I *DID* used to throw a rager almost every weekend. And then...bad shit happened. You know,” He looks meaningfully at Billy, who holds his gaze steadily, until Steve has to look away. “And then some *more* shit went down after that, and I stopped hanging out with Tommy and Carol, and pretty much everyone else, except for Nancy, and that was pretty much the end of the parties at *Chez Harrington*.”

“So what do you do *now*?”

What the hell is Billy getting at? “What do I do *now*? I don’t—I don’t know. I mean...not a lot, I guess. I go to school. I go to practice. I look out for the Party—the kids, I mean. I come home. I chill out. I watch a lot of movies. Just, you know, the normal shit, or whatever.”

“Jesus. That’s *sad*, Harrington.” Billy doesn’t sound like he’s trying to be cruel when he says it. But the words still sting.

“I mean, I guess...” Steve frowns. “Not exactly like I’ve got a whole bunch of other options. Follow Nancy and Jonathan around like a third wheel? Yeah, pass. And it’s not like Carol and Tommy would take me back as a friend after all that’s happened, even IF I was interested, which I’m NOT. I mean, I guess I could run off, join the

circus or something, but I'm allergic to cats, so lions and tigers are out, and besides, I'm kind of partial to sticking around and getting my diploma, so..."

"Nothing stopping you from dating though. Still plenty of bitches in the sea. You telling me the ladies don't still *love* King Steve? Not like the cows at Hawkins can afford to be picky. You're definitely not the worst this place has to offer."

Steve shakes his head. "I'm not interested. It's hard to go back to the Amy's and Becky's of the world after...after someone like Nancy."

"What? Don't tell me she's *that good* in bed." Billy grins, running the tip of his tongue down the middle of his bottom lip.

Steve rolls his eyes. "Yeah, not going there." The *again* is left unsaid. "It's not about that. I don't know man, she's smart. She knows herself. She knows what she wants." *And it's not me.* "You know many girls like that? 'Cause I don't."

Billy whistles. "Wow Harrington, you've still got it *bad*."

Steve's face heats. Oh God, not this again. "No. I don't."

"Yeah sure, pretty boy, whatever you say."

"So why'd your family move here, if California was so much better?" Steve tosses back, trying to deflect some of the heat off of himself.

But...he's curious too. And he remembers what he'd overheard Max say on that derelict schoolbus, months ago. That they'd moved here for a fresh start. He wonders what that means, exactly.

But he doesn't expect the shutters to slam down behind Billy's eyes, for his brows to draw together and his mouth to tighten, his face resetting to the angry mask Steve had become so familiar with in the time prior to this weekend.

"My dad had a job offer. He decided to take it. All the better to provide for his new, improved family. Not that it's any of your business," he sneers.

“Ooooo-kay,” Steve says, irked and a little hurt at the same time. “Sorry I asked.”

“That fucking makes two of us.”

So close. The guy had come so *close* to acting like an actual human. Steve sighs. He should have known better.

\*\*\*

It's later in the day and they're both in the deep in the doldrums of cabin fever again. Steve's sitting with his chin in his hands, staring into the fire.

Billy's been flipping intently through the Harringtons' entire record collection for the last half hour. He can't play them without electricity, obviously, so instead he's been entertaining himself by commenting aloud with his opinions about each album—talking less to Steve and more, it seems, just to hear himself talk. He'd been *immediately* unimpressed with everything he'd found in Steve's CD and cassette collection, and had moved on quickly to the old vinyls that belonged to Steve's Mom. “...*White Album*. Eh, overrated. *Rumours*. Decent. *Hotel California*...NICE! Hey Harrington, I think I like your mom better than you.”

Steve has been ignoring him, pointedly.

Then, in the middle of his spiel, Billy interrupts himself to ask, “You think anyone has ever actually died of boredom?”

The flickering of the flames has lulled Steve into a kind of mesmerized stupor, so he only belatedly realizes that Billy's actually directed the question to him.

Billy snaps his fingers impatiently. “Hey! Harrington! I SAID—”

“I know what you said,” Steve says, blinking to clear the bright after-image of the flames from his vision as he looks over to where Billy



sits, half-sprawled on the couch, the stack of albums in his lap.

“So...?”

Steve makes a noncommittal noise. Shrugs lazily. Bored or not, it's not like there's anything available for them to do without electricity. Cards are definitely out, after yesterday's fiasco.

“Don't you have some weights we could lift, or something?” Billy asks.

“Yeah, a whole weight bench...” Steve says, neglecting to mention that he rarely uses it, “...down in the garage.”

“Ugh!” Billy groans, throwing an arm over his eyes. “How about a smoke? At least tell me you have cigarettes! No!” He points an imperious finger in Steve's direction. “Do not tell me you don't smoke indoors.” Steve grimaces and shakes his head. His mom would kill him.

“We can blow the smoke up the chimney!”

“Don't have any. I quit smoking back in January. New Year's resolution,” Steve says. Not like he can tell him he did it so he wouldn't be out of breath the next time he had to run from the monsters.

And...also because Dustin wouldn't quit nagging him about it. “It's bad for your lungs, Steve! And your throat! Did you know it rots your teeth? Also, you know I have *allergies*, and the smoke makes me sneeze! It's gross, Steve! And it stinks! Secondhand smoke *kills*! Did you ever think about that??” Nevermind that he didn't even smoke with the kids in the car.

But *then* Dustin had started quoting statistics every time he saw him. “Twenty-five percent of smokers get emphysema, Steve! Twenty. Five. Percent! I don't want to have to bury you in an early grave. Steve, you don't want to put me through that, do you? Haven't we kids already lived through enough?! Come on, just *think* about quitting, Steve. Please? For me? Pleeeeeeease?”

Finally, Steve had, well, he'd basically given in. Not just because of a

pushy preteen, *obviously*. Just...because. It felt right. And it *was* kind of nice to have someone actually care about what he was doing, for once.

But now he's kind of questioning that choice, because it really *would* have been nice to have something to pass the time. And also because it might actually make Billy shut up about how bored he was. Damn.

"Come on man, not even an old pack of stale cigarettes tucked in the back of a drawer somewhere? Or the glove compartment of your car? I'm dying here!"

"Okay, A) *no*, I don't have any. Anywhere. And B) seriously? There is no way I'm opening that door and letting the heat out just to check the car. Do you actually want us to freeze?"

"Might be more interesting than this," Billy mutters. A second later he kicks the air mattress. "Okay, how about books? Tell me you've at least got something to read."

And...Steve does, actually; he has shelves and shelves of books in his father's seldom-used office, even though no one in his family is much of a reader. His mom had ordered them a long time ago, mostly (Steve guesses) for the sake of keeping up appearances.

It was a Time Life series: *The Most Influential Bullshit of All Time*, or... okay, probably not *that* exactly, but close enough. They'd arrived at the house when Steve was just a little kid, deliveries of box after box after box, full of these big, jewel-toned hardcovers, bound in leather, with ornate, gold-stamped titles. Steve had been fascinated with them: the size, the smell, the slipperiness of the thin, onion-skin pages. But his mom had refused to let him play with them. He still remembers her pulling one he'd particularly liked out of his hand—a bright blue volume with a picture of a tower and a disembodied eye floating above it on the cover—with a prim "No, no, *no* honey, these aren't for *you*."

But apparently they weren't for anyone else either, because they'd sat on the same shelves, undisturbed, gathering dust for years now. Well, not gathering dust, exactly, but they would have been, if it wasn't for Greta, the maid who came to clean every other week.

*That's* what had made it such a great hiding spot, Steve remembers now.

“Yeah, I do have books. And something else even better than that,” he tells Billy, unable to hide his grin at the prospect. Truth is, he's bored too. “Come on.”

Steve's mom has never been the snooping type, even back when he was younger and she was home more often. But Tommy's always been a notorious mooch, and back in the day, when they still used to hang out together, Steve had had to hide his weed in ridiculously creative spots just to keep the other boy from smoking it all.

And...“Aha!” he finds what he's looking for, pulling it free and lifting it triumphantly into the air. Steve had hidden a dime bag behind an enormous copy of *Doctor Zhivago*, where Tommy would never in a million years think to look. Only thing is, it's been hidden here for like, more than a year, at this point.

“I just realized...it's pretty old.” Steve frowns. “Do you think it's still any good?”

Billy inspects the bag. Opens it up. Smells it. Shrugs. “Don't see why not. The bag was sealed tight, there's no mold, and it's not like it was in direct sunlight. It's probably fine. I'll take my chances.”

So that's how they end up sparking one up together, right there in Steve's living room, both of them sitting cross-legged on the hearth so they can blow the smoke up the chimney as Billy had suggested, sharing a bag of chips and a couple bottles of Coke between them. It's amazing how much goodwill a couple of joints can foster.

A few tokes later, Billy suggests that Steve let him read his palm. “Oh come on,” he cajoles, coughing just a little as he exhales a frankly impressive lungful of smoke.

“I don't know...” Steve hedges. Billy's still a mystery to Steve—still blowing hot and cold whenever he feels like it—and Steve's a little scared that Billy's about to play some kind of practical joke on him.

“Oh come on, pretty boy! What, are you scared? I'm really fucking

good at it, I swear. Even if I haven't had a chance to practice in forever. Besides," Billy gives him a crooked grin, his tongue licking at one incisor. "Don't you wanna know your destiny?"

"Not...really?" Steve says, but after a little more cajoling, he ends up giving in. Besides, what else is there to do at the moment?

"You right-handed?" Billy asks. When Steve nods, he says, "Thought so. You favor your right side at practice. Too much," he clarifies. "It makes your game predictable." He points at himself, "Lefty. Though technically, I'm ambidextrous. 'S what makes me so good at basketball. AND other things. Just ask the chicks around here." He waggles his eyebrows, and Steve rolls his eyes, pantomimes gagging.

"Here, actually, lemme see both hands," Billy commands, placing the blunt between his lips so he can hold out both of his own hands, palms up. It takes Steve a minute to realize Billy wants him to place his hands in his. After a moment of hesitation, Steve goes with it, laying the backs of his hands into Billy's. Billy studies them intently, turning Steve's wrists so the fire illuminates all the little lines there. He swipes his thumbs over the center of Steve's palms, like he's clearing something away. Billy's own hands are wide underneath Steve's, his palms hot. Steve had feared Billy might be about to like, spit in to his palm, or try to start a game of thumps, something like that. But now, watching Billy's face as he studies Steve's hands so intently, he finally trusts that there's no prank coming. The guy's actually serious about this.

"I was taught that your dominant hand represents your outer life, and your non-dominant hand represents your inner life. Other people say your left hand is your past and present, your right hand is your future. Either way...this right here? This is called your Life Line..." Billy runs a fingertip down a line that starts just under Steve's forefinger, snaking around the base of his thumb, and terminating at the wrist. It tickles. Steve twitches. "Yours is deep, and strong. Unbroken."

"So like, does that mean I'll have a long life?"

Billy shakes his head. "More like...a purposeful life. A purpose-filled life, ya know?"

“Not...exactly,” Steve says. He glances up, and then all around them, indicating the room they’re in, the big house. “Not exactly surrounded by a whole lot of purpose here?”

“So go find some,” Billy says wryly. “Other than chauffeuring those brats around.”

“Moving on...” Steve prods, not about to go there with Billy Hargrove of all people.

“Fine. Next...okay, see here?” Billy indicates another line that runs horizontally across the center of Steve’s palm. “This is the Head Line. See where it meets your Life Line?” He taps the webbing between Steve’s thumb and forefinger, where the two lines come together. “Some people have a gap here. People like that are...arrogant. Self-satisfied. Unable to face their own flaws. But you don’t have that. Your lines meet.” Billy lifts his eyebrows pointedly. “No one’s gotta tell you what your shortcomings are. You’re plenty familiar.”

Well, he’s...not wrong.

Trying to lighten the mood, Steve says, “Right, so tell me: am I going to get rich, marry a Playboy bunny, live in a big house in Malibu?” He takes a pull off his own quickly dwindling blunt.

“Quiet,” Billy delivers a sharp pinch to the back of his hand. “I’m being serious.”

“Ow! Okay, okay!” Steve says, laughing around an exhale. “That hurt!” He flicks the remainder of the roach into the fireplace. *So long, stale weed. May your effects last.*

Billy ignores his complaints. “You’re already rich. And you’d hate Malibu, trust me. But okay, you wanna know about marriage? This is where you go,” Billy rubs his finger across another line that runs almost the full width of Steve’s palm, this one just a little higher than the Head Line. The touch elicits another involuntary twitch out of Steve. “This here is your Love Line. Yours is pretty...straight.” He meets Steve’s eyes. “Which means: when you fall in love, you’re all in. Maybe *too* in. See this?” He rubs his finger over the line again, indicating where it terminates in an upward arc, just between the

first and middle fingers. “When it curves away from from the person, like this, it means they’re willing to give a lot to their partner. Sometimes too much. Sometimes everything.” He’s looking at Steve while he talks, but he keeps stroking that same spot with his finger, the little fleshy space between the first and middle fingers. It’s...it feels...funny. Steve shivers.

“Between that, and the fact that it’s an unbroken line? Means you’re probably a one-woman kinda man.” Billy shakes his head. “Poor bastard.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Steve says.

Billy shrugs. “If it makes you feel any better, most people with a line like this are doomed—I mean *destined*—to get married, pair up for a lifetime, soulmates and shit. Maybe that means Miss Honor Roll will change her mind.”

Steve snorts. “Yeah, right. And maybe you’re full of shit. Next.”

Billy smirks. “Believe what you want, pretty boy. Doesn’t change the facts. Like this one right here...” He grasps Steve’s ring finger between the first and second knuckles, wiggles it back and forth a little. “These two parallel lines here, at the base of your finger? Kinda looks like a ring? They call it the Traveller’s Band. It means exactly what it sounds like. You’re gonna cover a lot of ground in your lifetime.”

Steve groans, covers his face with the hand Billy doesn’t have a grip on. “Ugh. That’s what...I don’t *want*...My dad wants me to come work for him. That’s what he does. *Covers a lot of ground*. Ugh. Shit. That is *not* something I want to do.”

Billy shrugs, takes one last careless drag off his own joint, then flicks the roach into the flames. “So don’t. Having this mark doesn’t mean you’ll be some jet-setting executive. It means you’re a wanderer. A nomad. More at home on the road than in any one place.”

Steve thinks Billy sounds like he’s describing himself more than he’s describing Steve. “Okay man, so let me get this straight: I’m going to live a life of purpose...constantly on the road...with the love of my

life, who I'll be with forever, because my hand says I'll only get married once. Yeah, okay. Can't WAIT to tell Nancy about the life of adventure we're going to lead together. She's going to LOVE that."

"Hey man, I don't write the script, I just read it back to you." Billy's eyes are serious and clear, studying him hard. If he's bullshitting, he deserves an Oscar. Steve might not put any stock in this stuff, but he's pretty sure Billy believes every word he's saying.

"Okay...well, maybe you need a refresher course in reading 'the script.'" Steve laughs. "Who taught you?"

He should have known. He should have noticed the way Billy's face went so very, carefully blank when he said, "My mom." He should have just moved the fuck on, problem solved.

But between the weed and the loose, easy vibe they've got going right now (at least, that's what he'll blame it on, because it's easier than owning the fact that he's an insensitive idiot), Steve *does not* move the fuck on. Instead he says, "Oh yeah? Does she still live back in California?"

"Nah," Billy says, his mouth drawing into a thin line. "She passed. Long time ago."

Steve's heart stutters painfully for a second. *Oh*. Suddenly he gets it. So much makes sense. "*Shit* man. I'm so sorry."

Billy's eyes have gone closed off and dark. "S fine. Like I said, it was a long time ago."

He drops Steve's hand and stands up, rubbing his palms roughly against the thighs of his borrowed sweats. He looks away, says, "That's all I got for you. 'M gonna go read now." He picks up the small stack of books he'd brought back from the office and wraps a blanket around his shoulders, takes a seat back over on the couch. Away from the circle of warmth. Away from Steve.

Steve feels the loss of his company keenly. *Nice job, jackass. You just had to stick your foot in your mouth. Again.*

Shit.

“So, uh...what are you reading?” he asks Billy, trying to sound friendly.

Billy looks up from the book, posture rigid. Even with a blanket tucked around him, he’s already starting to shiver. “It’s your book. Shouldn’t you recognize it?” he asks, his voice cold.

“Come on man, we’re in the same English class, what do you think?” Billy doesn’t respond, so Steve barrels on, “You’ve gotta know I’m barely passing. I’m not exactly a devoted reader. Or a reader at all, really.”

Billy rolls his eyes. “It’s *Letters From the Earth*.”

Steve shakes his head and raises his shoulders. “Still not ringing a bell.”

“Look, why do you care?”

Steve gets the feeling Billy’s not just asking about the book.

“Why not? We’re here. And we’re probably *going* to be here for a long time. It’s not like *I’m* ever going to read it. And...I kind of like talking to you, I guess. It’s better than *not* talking to you. So, you know, why not?”

“Because you’re a pain in my ass Harrington, and I don’t feel like talking to you about a book. So. Blow me.”

“Well...what if I made it worth your while?”

Billy quirks an eyebrow. “Doubtful. Unless you actually *are* planning on dropping to your knees and blowing me...”

Steve sighs. This is ridiculous. Only...wait. He tilts his head to the side, says, “Okay, hold on: aren’t you the one who keeps saying ‘no funny business?’”

Billy smiles meanly. “I don’t swing that way, pretty boy, but if you’re offering...well, you know, cabin fever’s been known to make people do crazy things. All that hair, I could probably pretend you’re a chick if I squint.”



Steve decides then to walk away. It's that or punch something. "You had to go and make it weird..."

Billy snorts. Pointedly opens his book again.

Steve ends up in the kitchen. This far away from the fire, it's so cold it's practically arctic. He tucks his fingers under his armpits to keep warm, rummaging around in the fading light until he finds what he's looking for. Then he returns to the living room, brandishing his loot victoriously. "Okay, but what would you say...to S'MORES?"

Billy just stares at him dumbfounded. And then keeps staring. And finally, just when Steve thinks it isn't going to work, Billy drops his head back against the sofa and laughs weakly. It's a tired sound. "I'd say that you're a fucking idiot, Harrington. You know I'm not an eight-year-old, right?" Steve deflates. Then Billy says, "...and if you don't make me s'mores right this minute, I won't be responsible for what happens next. I've got the munchies like a bitch! Where the hell did you even find that stuff? You been holding out on me this whole time?"

Steve grins. "No, I totally forgot I had it. I bought them for the shitheads, and then the storm happened, and so that means more s'mores for us now. On one condition: while we make them, you tell me about your book." He plops down by the fireplace, offers Billy one of the extra long barbecue skewers he'd grabbed to improvise as a toasting stick. "Deal?"

Billy shakes his head. But his expression has warmed. "Yeah, alright, fine. Get over here."

They sit in silence, toasting their skewered marshmallows by the fire. Steve would almost call the mood companionable, if he hadn't just nearly sent the guy off the rails again by practically talking shit about his dead mom. He wishes...wishes he'd known. They're both way too good at finding each other's sore spots, even when it's unintentional.

"Hey man," he says, looking at the fire, too nervous, too *raw*, to turn his head and look at the other boy dead on. "About what I said earlier..."

“Forget it,” Billy says. Commands, really.

But it’s weighing on him, and Steve needs to explain. Needs to make it right. “Yeah, I know, just hear me out. I...didn’t mean to shit on what you were doing. But these days...” *These days*. It always comes back to that. Seems like everything is just...*wrong*, these days. “I have no idea what I’m doing right now. Talking about future stuff just...really messes with my head. I was just trying to...I don’t know. Not think about the actual future, I guess.”

Billy blows out a hard breath. “S’fine.” He pulls his marshmallow out of the heat, blows on it perfunctorily and stuffs it in his mouth. He turns to look at Steve. “Eat your damn marshmallow, Harrington,” he says, around a mouthful of toasted sugar, somehow managing to look less ridiculous than he should.

“But...the s’mores!” Steve protests.

“The s’mores can wait. Eat your damn marshmallow and let me see your hands. We’re gonna finish this palm reading. There’s some stuff I didn’t get to say.”

Steve does as directed, stuffing his own hot marshmallow in his mouth.

Billy doesn’t waste any time. “You see this line?” He indicates a faint one that runs down the middle of Steve’s right hand. Steve nods. He sees it. “It’s called the Fate Line. Most people have two—one on each hand. But you don’t. Just the right. When someone only has one Fate Line, especially on their dominant hand, it means...basically, there’s no fate but the one you make for yourself. No luck, good OR bad. No destiny to land you where you don’t want to be. Or where you *do*. The thing that determines your life,” he says, as he strokes his thumb deliberately down Steve’s palm, following along that line again, “Is *you*. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Tingles break out across Steve’s scalp, racing over the top of his head and down the back of his neck. His breath stutters in. He tries to hide it by clearing his throat. “Um, okay. Choices, I’ve got them. That’s awesome. What, uh...what else?”

Billy lets go of Steve's left hand to cradle just his right, placing his second hand under Steve's forearm, so he can flex Steve's hand forward. "Your wrist. See those lines that crinkle there, when I move your hand? Those're called *Rascettes*."

Steve giggles a little. He can't help it. It's the weed.

Billy rolls his eyes. "Yeah yeah, I know. Sounds like a bad girl group from the fifties. But they're important. Especially yours. Because they tell on you. Most people have evenly spaced lines, all nice and neat. And *boring*. Just like the sad little lives they're going to lead. But yours," he shakes his head, gives Steve a wicked looking smile, "Yours, pretty boy, are a *mess*. They're squiggly and uneven and tassled at the ends. All over the place. Which means, whatever choices you make, your life is probably never going to be neat or boring. Hate to break it to Harrington Sr., but it doesn't look like you'll be following in Daddy's footsteps anytime soon." As he speaks, he traces the individual lines, his fingers light against the inside of Steve's wrist. He can't hide the shiver Billy's touch produces.

"My point is, Harrington, you might not believe in it, but the person who taught me...she, she knew her shit. She was *never* wrong. And I'm not wrong now. You got me?"

"I got you," Steve says, the words barely a breath.

"See, most of the time?" Billy continues, "Life's a bitch. And then you die. But sometimes...you get a chance to fuck that bitch before she fucks you. And you? With a palm like this? If you want to? You can ride her *hard*. You feel me?"

Billy has one thumb pressed firmly against the middle of Steve's palm. The thumb on his other hand makes circles on the delicate inner skin of Steve's wrist. Yeah, Steve *feels* him. Feels him so much that tingles are spilling his down his entire body. It's like chills...but delicious-feeling. Even his nipples peak up, going tight and sensitive, and...and he's starting to feel a tell-tale tingle elsewhere too. Somewhere lower. *Oh God*. He puts free his hand on Billy's, to...to make him stop, he thinks, but Billy just flicks Steve's hand away. "Uh-uh, Harrington, hands off. Who's reading who here?"

“Um...” Steve stands abruptly, pulling his hand out of Billy’s. “Sorry!” he says, clapping his hand over the spot Billy was petting just a moment before. His voice is way too loud. “Gotta pee! I’ll be right back!” He makes it a couple of steps before he turns back. Wincing, he asks, “You need anything while I’m up?”

Billy huffs out a mirthless laugh. “No.” He turns away, retrieving his book. Is he mad? Annoyed? Indifferent? Steve can’t be sure. He isn’t sure of anything, right now. He just...he just needs a minute to clear his head. “I’ll be right back,” He says again.

“Take your time,” Billy says coolly, not bothering to look up from his book.

In the bathroom, Steve closes the toilet lid. Takes a seat. Curls forward over his knees and tries to breathe deep. It’s fine. He’s fine. That wasn’t weird, right? Right. Except...it totally was. It was so weird. And kind of...nice. But mostly weird. Definitely mostly weird.

For one stupid, brief moment, he has the urge to do *the thing* again. Clear his head. Make everything else go away. But, no. *No*. This is no big deal though, right? Like Billy said: cabin fever makes people do crazy things. Feel crazy things. It’s fine. He’s fine. Everyone’s fine.

Billy doesn’t even look up when Steve returns. “So...” Steve starts hesitantly. He desperately wants to recapture the easy rapport they had going before he left. “You promised to tell me about your book, in exchange for s’mores...”

Billy lets the book drop into his lap, looking up at the ceiling and inhaling deep. “You’re a pain in my ass, Harrington. You know that?”

Now *THIS* is territory Steve is familiar with. “Takes one to know one,” he says, dropping to down to sit across from Billy, so they’re facing each other. “But a deal’s a deal. So spill.”

Billy sighs vocally. “It’s called *Letters From the Earth*. By Mark Twain. Same guy that wrote Huckleberry Finn. Like the name says, it’s about a bunch of letters.”

“Can you be a little more specific?”

Billy narrows his eyes. "I don't know. You gonna let me talk?"

Steve pantomimes zipping his lips.

"These letters, they're written by Satan. 'Cause he's stuck here on Earth, and it's a weird fucking place, so he writes all these letters, sends them back home to Heaven for Gabriel and Michael to read."

"So it's like...a scary story? The Devil sending threats back to the angels in Heaven?"

Billy shakes his head. "No. 'Cause in this story, Satan isn't the Devil. He's not even a fallen angel. More like, he's in time out. Sent down here to observe. Only, he gets here, and he starts watching people, and he finds out that the humans are morons, and it's because God made us that way. It was Twain's examination of the weaknesses of God and man. By the time he wrote it, he was old and disillusioned, a completely different man from the one who wrote about Tom and Huck painting fences. He'd just lost his wife and one of his kids, and he was mad at everything, but especially God. Because God's supposed to be superior to us, right? He's *God*. But also he's petty, and cruel, and unfair, and unforgiving, so why should he be surprised when humans are too, and—what? Why are you staring at me like that?"

Steve shakes his head, unable to hide his amazement. "Nothing, sorry. It's just...you're kind of blowing my mind, man."

"What?" One corner of Billy's mouth quirks up. "'Cause I've got...sympathy for the devil?" He snorts at his own joke.

"No...because you can sit down, and read all that, and not just *get it*, but get *all that* from it, and make it sound like it's actually *interesting*." Steve's a little in awe. He wonders what it feels like, to just *understand* so effortlessly. "I mean, we're in the same English class. You know. It's like, no matter how hard I try, I just can't get it. I know I'm not the brightest guy and all, but like, math? Science? Those are fine. I'm not a genius, but I'm doing okay. English, though..." he shakes his head. "Like, fucking Shakespeare? It's like reading another language."

“You don’t suck at English,” Billy says.

“You don’t have to be nice about it, man. I know I’m dumb, okay? It’s fine.” Steve rubs the back of his neck, looking down at his lap. He knows how stupid he is, but it’s not like he enjoys admitting it.

Billy scoffs. “Harrington, since when am I ever NICE?” he asks. “Stories are stories, and everyone likes stories. Especially good ones. And Shakespeare was the master of telling stories. There’s a reason we’re still talking about his stuff hundreds of years later. If you think you don’t like learning those stories, it’s because someone never told them to you the right way. *You* don’t suck at English—your teachers suck at English.” He puts the book down, stands.

“Wait, where are you going?” Steve asks.

Billy walks backwards, sending him a lazy two-finger salute. “Bathroom break,” He says with a wink, taking one of the lit candles with him.

His bathroom break takes a ridiculously long time. He’s starting to wonder if maybe Billy’s passed out in there again, if he should go check on him, when the guy returns, a new book in his hand. This one is only slightly thicker than the Mark Twain one, and bound in dark red leather. Billy holds it up so Steve can see. “Shakespeare,” he says. “His sonnets.”

“Noooo,” Steve groans, falling backwards onto the mattress and covering his face in mock anguish. “Please, not that shit again. I barely survived when Mrs. Teneman taught it last semester. I know it’s supposed to be English, but all I hear is gibberish, man.”

“That’s because that old cow has no idea what the fuck she’s doing. Or maybe she just doesn’t care. She’s old as dirt, she knows no one’s going to fire her—probably just punching the clock until she retires. She cares fuck-all about the students that she’s actually supposed to be teaching. It’s a joke. The whole school’s a joke. No offense.”

“She’s probably miserable,” Steve says. “I’d be miserable if I had to teach that crap to a bunch of teenage assholes day in and day out.”

“Then she should have picked another job—one that doesn’t involve torturing kids,” Billy says with ire, flipping through the new book. He sits down beside Steve on the air mattress, closer than he was before he left. But Steve doesn’t mind.

It’s cold, and getting colder. Steve could see his own breath when he went to the bathroom earlier—one measly fireplace isn’t nearly enough to heat this big, high-ceilinged house, and he kinds of wants to scoot a little closer, press his shoulder to Billy’s, share some body heat. The warmth of a nearby body can only be a good thing, at this point.

Then Billy says, “Okay, jackass, listen to this:

*My love is as a fever, longing still  
For that which longer nurseth the disease,  
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,  
Th’uncertain sickly appetite to please.  
My reason, the physician to my love,  
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,  
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve  
Desire is death, which physic did except.  
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,  
And frantic mad with evermore unrest.  
My thoughts and my discourse, as madman’s are,  
At random from the truth vainly expressed;  
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,  
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.*

“Get it?” Billy says then. And...the way Billy reads the poem—the

*sonnet*—the way he breaks it up, the emphasis he puts on certain words, Steve really feels like he's close. He *almost* gets it. It's all squirming around in his brain, the words struggling to make sense of themselves, and he's *nearly* there, but...but he's scared that he's going to get it wrong.

"I don't...I'm not sure—" he stutters.

Billy holds up a hand. "It's alright, Harrington, don't pop a vein. I'm gonna read it again, but I'm going to change out this one little word in the fifth line, and use two more familiar words in it's place. I think you'll get it then. Just relax, and let yourself hear."

Steve almost tells him not to bother, it's a lost cause, but he wants to get it, he does, so he lies back, and lets the words wash over him as Billy recites the verse again. At first, it's all the same tangle of flowery, antiquated speech, but then Billy gets to that line he mentioned, and says:

*My COMMON SENSE, the physician to my love,*

*Angry that his prescriptions are not kept...*

...and it's like a LIGHTBULB goes on inside Steve's head. He sits straight up in the middle of the poem. "Oh shit!" He GETS IT.

"He's IN LOVE!" Steve shouts, elated. "Shakespeare's in love, and he shouldn't be, and he knows it's going to be the death of him, and he still doesn't care, even though his mind tells him he's wrong, because nothing else matters compared to how he feels!" He says it all in a rush, scared the knowing is going to escape him before he finishes, but it doesn't. He *gets* it. "That's it, right? I'm right...right?"

Billy nods, grinning. "Attaboy. Told you, anyone can get it, if it's read the right way."

Steve hoots, punches both fists up over his head. He *gets it*! For once he doesn't feel like a total bonehead! It's amazing. "How did you know how to do that?" Steve wants to know.

"We studied Shakespeare junior year at my old school. I had a really good teacher. A bunch of them, actually. And I just, I don't know, I



really like Shakespeare,” Billy says.

“Is that why you miss California?” Steve says. If it is, he kinda gets it.

Billy chuckles darkly. “Harrington, that is the *least* of the many reasons I hate it here. But yeah, that too.”

“Well, that was seriously cool, man,” Steve says. “Thank you.”

Billy just shrugs it off. “Don’t worry about it.” And it’s kinda hard to tell in the firelight, but if Steve didn’t know better, he’d think Billy’s cheeks are pink. “Wanna try another?” he asks.

Steve’s a little worried that this might’ve just been a fluke, but whatever it is they’re doing right now feels amazing, so he says, “Yeah man, lay it on me.”

As Billy’s flipping pages, looking for his next teaching miracle, Steve thinks maybe he should go ahead and set the bar low, just in case. He confesses, “I’m really glad I didn’t just guess the first time you read it. I kinda thought he might be in love with another guy, the first time around, because you said ‘*his* prescriptions.’ But then I realized there was no way Shakespeare was writing love poems about a guy so....what is it? Why are you laughing?” Suddenly he wishes he hadn’t said anything.

Billy grins at him broadly, starts flipping pages with more intention. He finds the pages he’s looking for, and says, “Try this:

*A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted*

*Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;*

*A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted*

*With shifting change, as is false woman’s fashion:*

*An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,*

*Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;*

*A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,  
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.  
And for a woman wert thou first created,  
Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,  
And by addition of me thee defeated  
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.  
But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,  
Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.*

Billy lifts his chin in challenge. "Well? What do you think?"

This one is way tougher. But...the way he'd emphasized certain phrases: "*master-mistress of my passion*," "*a man in hue*," "*pricked thee out for women's pleasure*."

No. No way. Steve shakes his head, a little uncomfortable, a little convinced Billy's just having a laugh at his expense. Because...it can't be. "You're just screwing with me because you know I don't get it."

Billy lifts an eyebrow. "You sure? How about this one:

*What's in the brain, that ink may character  
Which hath not figur'd to thee my true spirit?  
What's new to speak, what now to register,  
That may express my love or thy dear merit?  
Nothing, sweet boy; but yet like prayers divine  
I must each day say o'er the very same,  
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine,  
Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name.*

*So that eternal love, in love's fresh case*

*Weighs not the dust and injury of age,*

*Nor gives to necessary wrinkles place,*

*But makes antiquity for aye his page,*

*Finding the first conceit of love there bred*

*Where time and outward for would show it dead.*

"Still think I'm screwing with you?" Billy asks. He'd looked amused before, but now his face is...something else. Determined, but a little unsure.

Steve doesn't get all of it, but....*Sweet boy*, Billy had read. *Thou mine, I thine*. Steve shakes his head. Can't believe it. "No way. You're telling me the guy that wrote Romeo and Juliet was gay?"

Billy shrugs. "Maybe. Some people think so. Or maybe there was just one guy he couldn't get out of his head, even if he wanted to."

Steve's mind is blown. "So...why don't they teach this in school?"

"Same reason they don't teach us anything worth knowing," Billy draws. "The real world doesn't like the truth."

Steve thinks about a little girl with no name raised in a lab, about the secret that burrowed it's way under Hawkins for a whole year, about *Barb*. About a boy who hurts other people so no one will guess how bad his own father hurts him.

"*Fucking A*," he says. "You're not wrong."

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They go to bed not long after the sun sets. There's nothing else to do. The electricity's been out for so long that it's barely warmer inside

than out. Their only refuge is the small semi-circle of heat near the fireplace. Steve keeps it fed, so the flames never dwindle from a steady, crackling blaze, but that's going to change once they go to bed and there's no one to watch it. There's no help for it.

So they pile every blanket they can find onto the air mattress. There's no discussion about where anyone's sleeping tonight. Their only option is sleeping on the air mattress together, close as possible to the fire. But even despite all the blankets, Steve can feel Billy shivering from his side of the mattress.

"Billy, you okay?"

"No, I'm f-fucking c-cold!" Billy says, his teeth chattering.

"We could..." Steve hesitates, then decides to keep going, "I mean...it was really warm when we woke up this morning. We could—" Before he can finish his suggestion, there's movement, and Steve feels the warm, broad expanse of Billy's back press up to his own. It's a testament to the cold that Billy hadn't even tried to protest.

"Jesus, how can you stand living here?" Billy complains, pressing in tight against the curve of Steve's spine. "My toes are cold! My fingers are cold! Everything in between is cold! Even my freaking nose is about to freeze!"

He doesn't bother pointing out it's not usually like this. Truth is, Steve's just as cold. "Here," he flips the blankets up high, so only the tops of their heads peek out. "Better?"

There's a pause. Steve feels Billy wiggle down deeper into the covers, then gruffly, he says, "Yeah, actually. Thanks."

Steve starts to get warm. Thanks to the shared heat of their two bodies, it's actually comfortable under the covers, and Steve...he could just let go right now. Easy as that. The wind's howling outside, but he's safe. He's warm. And even though it's not even eight o'clock yet, he can feel the reassuring weight of sleep pressing down on him like a heavy blanket. But...there's still something he wants to tell Billy. It feels like he needs to say it now.

He clears his throat. "Hey, man," he starts. "I just wanted to say... seriously, like, thank you."

"...for what?"

"For that stuff you did with the poems. For what you said about school. About me and school. That was...you didn't have to, and no one's ever said that, and...I don't know man. Just, thank you."

Billy huffs out a breath, a bemused little sound. "Yeah sure, whatever."

And that's that, Steve thinks, and he closes his eyes, but then—

"You're so fucking weird, you know that, Harrington?"

"What? No I'm not."

"Yeah. You are. I'm the one camped out in *your* house, eating *your* food, wearing *your* clothes, taking *your* fucking charity, and you're over here thanking *me*. That's weird, amigo."

"Nah, it's not like that," Steve tells him. Because...*amigo*. Steve took French, not Spanish, but he knows *that* word. "We're friends, remember?"

They're not moving, just laying there, but somehow there's still a sense of Billy going still. *Freezing*. Then he pulls in a shuddery breath, and he's rolling over, Steve can feel his body moving, and there's something achy and hungry in his voice when he asks, "Are we? Are we really friends?"

"*Yeah*." Steve doesn't even hesitate. He means it. He's *surprised* a little, by how much he means it. It feels a little psycho to say it, but he and Billy Hargrove are honest-to-god friends. He rolls over to say it again to Billy's face. *Yes, we're really friends*. But...*oh*. Billy's shaking his head. It's too dark under the blankets to make out much, and Steve only gets the barest suggestion of Billy's features, but he can see enough to tell that he disagrees. "I mean...aren't we?" Steve asks.

"If you really knew me," Billy whispers in that low, scratchy voice of

his, “You wouldn’t say that. You wouldn’t want to be my friend. If you knew the shit that lives inside my head, the things I want to *do* sometimes...you wouldn’t want a fucking thing to do with me. You wouldn’t even want to be near me.”

He’s wrong.

“What makes you think you could surprise me? I mean, we’ve seen each other at our *worst*. As bad as it gets. And we’ve had each other’s backs every time. I mean, if that’s not friendship, I don’t know what is,” Steve tells him. This time he’s not caught off guard by the vehemence in his own voice.

“Harrington...” Billy trails off with a miserable-sounding sigh. He makes these sounds then, a couple of them, these harsh, skittering breaths, almost like silent sobs, and then...oh! *Oh shit*, that’s Billy hand, tangling in Steve’s hair, pulling him forward so...so he can press his forehead against Steve’s. Billy sighs again. They’re so close Steve can feel Billy’s breath against his mouth this when he speaks, “You break it, you bought it. Amigo.” His fingers tighten in Steve’s hair so hard it’s nearly painful.

Steve wraps his own fingers around Billy’s wrist, a reminder: *Easy there. Easy. I’m here, too*. “Ditto,” he murmurs.

He must have drifted off then, because he doesn’t remember anything after that. It’ll be days later when he finally recalls the soft, barely-there impression of lips pressing warmly at the corner of his mouth. By then, he’ll tell himself it was a dream. By then, it won’t matter.

## Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading! Feedback is love! <3

Questions? Comments? Got a bad case of the Harringroves and you need to talk to a fellow sufferer? Come find me on Tumblr! I’m LaVeraceVia there too.

## 7. When You Shake

### Summary for the Chapter:

THE DAMN DOORBELL IS STILL RINGING.

“Nnnnnngghhh, Chrissakes Harrington, do something about that!” Billy mutters beside him, rolling over and stuffing the pillow over his head.

Steve wiggles out of the tangled mass of blankets, stumbles blinking to the door and turns the knob. He squints sleepily down at the doorbell-ringing culprit. It’s Dustin.

Uh-oh.

*In which the cat is firmly, most emphatically, out of the bag.*

### Notes for the Chapter:

I know I’ve said the shit hits the fan in previous chapters, but in this chapter, *the shit REALLY hits the fan*. Both boys are confronted head on with their fears, and well, neither one of them copes particularly well (at least, not at first). One character, in particular, turns to an extremely unhealthy method to process (or rather, NOT process) his feelings. Please pay heed to the updated tags. See end notes for trigger warnings/a more elaborate explanation.

He’s awake before he knows why. It’s still early, he knows that. Too early. There’s a hum in the background that wasn’t there before, and something else is different too. Steve’s sleep-addled brain has just about placed what it is when Billy says muzzily, “Harrington...

power's back."

"Uh huh. 'S great, man. Go back to sleep." The sun's not even up yet, and Steve's as comfortable as he can ever remember being. They've moved in their sleep, pressed themselves tightly back-to-back again. No, wait. They're not. Back-to-back. Uh-oh. Maybe Steve was the only one who'd moved in his sleep—rolled over and snuggled back against the heat of Billy's sleeping body, because he's pretty sure that's Billy's chest against his shoulder blades. That's *definitely* his arm wrapped around Steve's waist. There's no doubt that's his breath against the back of Steve's neck.

Steve feels a little frisson of fear then, in the moment when he realizes what they're doing. And then he feels something else too, a second, indefinable emotion that tightens down deep in his belly, twisting like a cramp but without the pain.

He wonders if Billy's going to freak out on him when the reality of their position sets in. He braces a little for it...

But no, Billy's already settling back in, drifting off to sleep just as Steve had instructed, his body going soft against Steve's, his breath evening out to a slow, warm whisper on the back of Steve's neck. And Steve should move, he *knows* he should, and make things less awkward while he can. But he's safe and he's warm, surrounded by a cocoon of blankets and the reassurance of another body, and a drowsing, subconscious part of him even wants to turn over and cuddle closer into the heat, but just the slightest movement of his body is met with a chill, so Steve snuggles down where he is, and thinks no more.

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The doorbell is ringing. Over and over, and LOUD, pulling Steve out of a dream about...something...all he can remember is warmth, and low, husky laughter, and the sensation that everything is *good*...and then he's awake, and disoriented and...



And he's hot as hell, because they're covered in blankets, and the central heat is humming away, because, oh shit *that's right*, the power came back on last night, and he's wrapped up tight in Billy's embrace (wait, *what?*) and THE DAMN DOORBELL IS STILL RINGING.

"Nnnnnngghhh, Chrissakes, Harrington, do something about that!" Billy mutters beside him, rolling over and stuffing the pillow over his head.

Steve wiggles out of the tangled mass of blankets, stumbles blinking to the door and turns the knob. He squints sleepily down at the doorbell-ringing culprit. It's Dustin.

"Steve! Buddy! I bring sustenance!" Dustin says, his voice cracking over the octaves of puberty as he grins that familiar, sunny grin up at him. He's clutching a large brown paper bag in his hand, and Steve has such a surreal, intense moment of *deja vu* that, for a second, he's convinced that it's somehow November of last year again, and Dustin's here with chicken soup and aspirin, making sure Steve's not dead.

But no. There's snow on the ground, and Dustin's so bundled up from head to toe that he looks like a tick about to pop, and there's a honk from the car idling in Steve's driveway, and when Steve looks up, Claudia Henderson is trilling "Hi Steve, sweetheart! Hope you enjoy the chili!" He makes his mistake when he steps out the door to wave at Claudia and yell his thanks, because in that same moment, Dustin says, so quickly Steve can barely catch it: "You don't mind if I use your bathroom, do you, buddy? Thanks!" and slips behind him, right through the front door and into the house.

Every internal alarm Steve has goes on red alert—*Danger! Danger Will Robinson!*—because it's most definitely NOT November of last year, and Steve's not laid up, recovering from just having his face pounded in, but Billy Hargrove is, and he's inside, where Dustin just went, and *ohhh* shit—

"DUSTIN WAIT!" Steve charges after Dustin, slamming the door behind him, trying to catch up, trying to deescalate, trying to buy some time, trying to do...something.

Dustin cocks his head, looking for all the world like a puzzled cocker spaniel. "What?"

Steve flaps a hand desperately, hoping words will come to him that will stop the thing he's pretty sure is about happen. He runs a hand through his sleep-mussed hair. "What uh...what are you doing here, buddy?"

"Dropping off some *chili*, didn't you hear what my mom said?" Dustin says, with a good-natured eye roll. He starts unraveling himself from his many layers of winter wear right there in the foyer, toeing off his winter boots and making for the living room.

"WAIT! Um..." Steve winces, clears his throat. Starts again, "Yeah, but why uh...why are you taking your coat and shoes off, pal? Thought you were just dropping the chili off!" He tries to make that last part, *thought you were just dropping the chili off*, loud enough that Billy can hear him and prepare for...whatever this is about to turn into.

"Because I have to *pee* Steve, and my mom insists that I bundle up like it's the freaking Siberian steppe, you know how overprotective she is, and do you have any idea how hard it is to pee through like, five layers, and also I don't want to track slush across your floors, and you're the one who said to always take off my shoes because your mom didn't want footprints on the carpet, and it's kind of an emergency, I basically had to wait *forever* for you to answer your doorbell, and I really thought you might be dead for a second, and... why are you out of breath, Steve?" Dustin says, without once taking a breath himself.

Steve struggles to find words that will help. But words have never been his friend, and unsurprisingly, they've totally abandoned him now, so instead he takes in a mouthful of nervous air, feeling his cheeks puff out with it, then expels it and says, "I'm...uh, not?"

"Yeah, you are. And your face is red. And you look freaked out. Steve, is everything okay?" Dustin says.

"Fine!" Steve waves a dismissive hand. "Everything's fine!" It would be great if he actually SOUNDED like everything was fine.

“...Sure.” Dustin sounds thoroughly unconvinced, as he holds up the paper bag and heads for the rest of the house. “Well, I’m going to go put the chili in the fridge and use your bathroom, since everything’s fine...”

“Wait!” Steve flails, trying to grab for him, but he’s too late, Dustin’s already out of reach, moving farther into the house.

Then everything goes nuclear.

“OH MY GOD!” Dustin hollers from the living room. Steve winces and trots in behind him to see if he can salvage the situation.

“SON OF A BITCH!” Dustin is yelling, pointing emphatically at the air mattress and its occupant like there’s a horde of demodogs in the house. “Steve, what is that SON OF A BITCH doing in your house?!”

“Who the hell ordered an angry Hobbit this early?” Billy’s sitting up, eyeing the whole situation with irritated bemusement, scratching idly at his naked chest. He’s feigning indifference, playing it off like this is nothing, but Steve can see the panic in his eyes, and—wait a minute.

“When did you take your shirt off??” Steve asks. He doesn’t mean to say it, it just comes tumbling out.

“When I woke up and it was hot as hell in here,” Billy answers indignantly. He tips his chin in Steve’s direction. “When did you take your pants off?”

“What?” Steve looks down at his bare legs, just now realizing that he’s only clad in sweatshirt and boxers. “Oh.” He normally only sleeps in underwear, so he must have kicked his pants off in his sleep at some point?

“WHAT. THE HELL. IS HAPPENING, STEVE?” Dustin yells with increasing hysteria.

Steve holds up a beseeching hand. “Dustin, just calm down. This isn’t what it looks like.”

“Oh really? Because it looks like you just slept with the crazy son of a bitch that tried to kill you last year!” Dustin replies. Well, technically

he's not wrong. At least he's not screaming at the top of his lungs anymore?

Billy, on the other hand... "Call me a son of a bitch one more time, Frodo," he says ominously, rising to his knees.

"You," Steve growls, pointing to his houseguest (the *first* one), "KNOCK it off. Just...give us a minute."

"And you," he turns to Dustin, softening, placing an arm around his shoulders and herding him towards this kitchen. "It's okay, buddy. I can explain. Let's just...you said that chili needs to be put away right? C'mon, let's go this way."

"What the HELL, Steve?" Dustin hisses again, once they get to the kitchen. He starts pacing back and forth.

"Okay, just chill out for a second, bud. Have a seat. I'll get you something to drink," Steve says.

"I don't *want* something to drink! I don't *want* to sit down. I WANT my best friend to tell me why he's fraternizing with the enemy—particularly the one that *beat his face in* last year!" Dustin says, voice cracking as it rises hysterically.

"Okay, first of all, I'm not *fraternizing* with the enemy, it's not like he's the *Mind Flayer* or something pal, and even if he was—wait a minute. Did you just say I was your best friend?" Steve's heart swells in his chest. He's...touched. He claps a hand on Dustin's shoulder and gentles his tone when he says, "Listen, man, I need you to know that everyone is fine. I'm fine. He's fine. You're fine. No one is being hurt right, okay? I know what I'm doing, and—"

Billy chooses that moment to yell from the living room. "HEY! Listen up, Short Round! If you so much as breathe a *word* of this, I swear to GOD—"

"DUDE! *Come on!*" Steve hollers back. Then he sees Dustin making for the living room, determination on his face. "Nope!" he says, heading him off at the pass and gently guiding him over to the table. "*SIT*. I'll be right back," he tells the younger boy. "*STAY*."

He sticks his head into the living room. "You're not helping. Take a chill pill and shut up!" he hisses at Billy, then heads back to Dustin before he has a chance to reply.

"Okay," he starts, running a hand through his hair as he takes a seat of his own at the table, "Let's try this again. I know you're freaked out, but everything and everyone is *okay*."

"Why is he here, Steve?" Dustin asks solemnly.

"Max called me after I dropped you guys off Saturday night. Asked me to come get Billy, because there was some trouble at home." He sees Dustin's eyes widen, and hastily adds, "He DID NOT hurt her, if that's what you're thinking, she's *fine*. She asked me to help. And that's all I'm going to say about that, because it's not my story to tell. So anyway, I brought him back here, and then the storm happened, and we've been snowed in since. It got cold, because the power was out, so we've been sleeping in front of the fireplace, on the same air mattress. That's all. Any questions?"

"I don't know," Dustin says. "I guess I still don't get why you'd let him stay. Is he blackmailing you or something? He's...he's not a good guy, Steve!"

Steve chooses his words carefully, hyperaware of the precariousness of the situation he's in. "I'm—okay, I'm not sure how to say this in a way that'll make sense?" he says, then holds up a hand. "But no, before you ask again, he's *not* blackmailing me. He's...look, I know this is going to sound weird, but he's my *friend*."

"Friends don't hurt each other, and he hurt *you*, Steve! I was there! If Max hadn't knocked him out first, he would, he would've...he's NOT A GOOD GUY, STEVE!" Dustin protests.

Steve sighs. He wonders if Dustin would have thought *Steve* was a good guy, if he'd met him just a year ago. He's pretty sure he knows the answer. But he's not sure he can say this in a way to make Dustin understand—he's not even sure he understands it himself. But Dustin's distress isn't diminishing, and if Steve's not careful, if he doesn't diffuse this situation right now, he's going to end up with a doorstep full of middle-schoolers, ready with some half-cocked, hare-

brained plan to get rid of Billy like he's another monster from their D&D manual. Knowing them, they just might succeed.

So Steve lowers his voice, speaking quietly. This conversation is for him and Dustin alone. "It's not always about bad guys and good guys, bud. Sometimes things...are more complicated than that."

Dustin looks dubious.

"Okay, I'm messing this up, you know I'm bad with words. And I wish I could explain it in a way that makes more sense, but for now, I need you to believe me when I say: I know what I'm doing, and there's a reason for it. It's kinda like...when you guys met Eleven and you couldn't tell anyone. It's the same thing here. Not for the same reasons, but...it's the same." He takes in Dustin's furrowed brow, the dismayed set of his mouth. "Is this making any sense?"

Dustin shakes his head. "I don't know. I don't trust him, Steve. I *do* trust you, but...it's just..."

"What?" Steve prods gently.

"Lucas is scared of him," Dustin says, looking at his shoes. "He won't admit it, but he is. Still. So how can you hang out with this guy? What if he...what if he tries to hurt—"

"He won't," Steve says. Firm. Certain. "That will *never* happen again. I won't let it. I promise." But he sees the doubt on Dustin's young face, warring with the hero worship that's always a little present in his eyes. "I *swear*. Come on. What do we say?"

"Friends don't lie," Dustin replies dutifully.

"Friends don't lie," Steve echoes. "I can't explain everything right now, but I won't lie to you either." He leans forwards and whispers, "'Cause there are things, sometimes... that you do, that you *have* to do, because they feel right to you, even if they don't make sense to anyone else. That's what this is. Capeesh?"

He holds his hand out, and after a moment of hesitation Dustin takes it, offering him a small, hesitant smile. "Yeah." They do their secret handshake: a low five, then one in reverse, following by a one pump

handshake, ending in finger guns pointed at the other guy and a wink.

After that, Dustin declines to use the bathroom, deciding he can hold it after all. Steve promises Dustin he'll stop by to see him on Saturday, then sees him back out to his mom's car.

"Oh yeah," Dustin turns back to Steve, "I almost forgot. Mom said it was on the radio—school's back in tomorrow, now that the power's back and the main roads are almost cleared. In case you hadn't heard." He gives Steve one last meaningful look and then climbs in the passenger seat. Claudia honks merrily as they pull out, waving a hand out the window. Steve doesn't miss the way Dustin turns in his seat, watching him steadily as they drive away. He stands there until they're gone.

When he returns, he finds Billy kneeling beside the air mattress, looking decidedly green around the gills. "Hey—" Steve starts, but Billy cuts in, "That's it. I'm dead. We're both dead. I'm gonna be sick."

"Hey, no! Wait, what? We're not—I mean, why do you think we're dead?" Steve asks.

Billy's chest heaves, "That little twerp is going to tell everyone he knows, Steve! Everyone's going to know I was staying here! And that we were *in bed* together! Everyone's going to think we were *fucking*! It was bad enough before, but when my dad hears about this, he's going to put me in the *ground*! You'll be fucking lucky if he doesn't put *both of us* in the ground!!" His eyes are wide and panicked, and he seems to be on the verge of hyperventilating.

"Hey, hey, nooo, it's okay. Look. Look at me." He puts a hand on Billy's bare shoulder, then thinks better of it when Billy turns blazing eyes to meet his. Holding both hands up in front of him, Steve says, "Listen to me. First of all, I'm not scared of your dad. *No*," he enunciates when Billy tries to correct him. "I know you think I should be, but there's a whole lot worse shit out there, and I've seen it. I *survived* it. Your dad can't hurt me, okay? Second, he's not going to hurt you either, because he's not going to find out. It's just Dustin. He's freaked out because of...well, you know, the stuff last year, but

he's a good kid."

"Yeah, right. You and I both know that "good kid" is going to tell his merry little band of creeps that we were sleeping together, and then *they'll* tell everyone they know, and pretty soon everyone in Hawkins will know, including Neil!" Billy yells. He curls over, fisting both hands in his hair. He's shaking.

"But that's what I'm trying to tell you: I don't think he *will*," Steve argues, "I mean, yeah—he'll tell Lucas, and Mike, and Will, but look, that was always going to happen, because Max is friends with them, and those kids don't keep secrets from each other...at least, not for long. But they're freaking experts at keeping secrets from everyone else. Think about it—has Max ever told you what she did with your Camaro that night?" The pissed off look on Billy's face tells Steve all he needs to know. "See? There you go. I know we still don't know each other very well, but you have to know by now that you can trust me. So *trust me*. Truth is, Dustin will probably never let ME hear the end of this, but you're going to be fine."

Billy's laugh is without humor. "Fine. Yeah alright, I'll be fine." He collapses into a sitting position, gives Steve a weary look. "It's time for you to take me home, Harrington."

Dread floods Steve's body. "Nonono! C'mon, man, you don't have to go right now! You don't even have a plan. You can't just—"

"I can't just keep hiding out at some rich asshole's house like a pussy. I've gotta go home, and take my lumps, and keep my head down, and fucking get through it. Like I always do."

Steve clenches his jaw. "What are you going to do about the money? You don't have it."

"I do have it. I just don't want to give it to him."

Steve gapes.

"Don't look at me like that, dumbass," Billy says wearily. "I didn't take it; I wasn't lying about that before. But I've got savings he doesn't know about. It's not much, but it's enough, probably. I don't



know how much will make him happy, but...if I tell him that it's all I have, maybe he'll be satisfied to take that. If he isn't..." A muscle tics in Billy's jaw. The grin he gives when he meets Steve's eyes is an ugly thing. "Whatever happens, I've had worse."

"Billy, he's going to hit you again."

"Probably."

"It hasn't even been four days yet, what if he hurts—"

"Don't make it worse, Harrington," Billy's voice is flat, dispassionate, but his leg is jiggling a million miles an hour.

Heat prickles behind Steve's eyes. "Please. Please just stay a little while longer. You don't have to do this right now. Just give it one more day. Dustin said school's back in session tomorrow, and—"

"I'm not one of your minions, *Saint Jude*. You can't protect everyone. Look at what happened last time you tried. Take me home."

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So Steve takes Billy home.

They don't talk. Even with Steve driving cautiously, it should only be a short ride. But it feels like it takes forever. Somehow it's still not long enough.

There are only a few other cars out, some with chains on their tires, a few more of them just taking it easy like Steve, but for the most part, they have the road to themselves. There's no snow falling anymore, but the sky is still grey and overcast, casting an unnatural colorless light over the landscape. It gives Steve the strange, unsettling sensation that they're somehow outside of any normal time and space—in between worlds, somehow. If only he could find the right words to actually stop the clock. Turn it backwards and fix the mistake Billy's about to make.

About halfway there, Billy punches Steve's dashboard. No warning, no explanation, no words at all, he just sits up straight all of a sudden, leans forward, and *BAM!* Throws his fist forward right into the flat face of the passenger-side glove compartment. Then he does it again, and again, and again. Steve doesn't say anything, just pulls over and lets him go, until he finally subsides. When Billy stops, the skin of his knuckles is broken, and there's a bloody smear against Steve's glove compartment. "Billy, *listen*. You don't have to do—" Steve starts.

"If you invite me to come back to your place one more time, Harrington, I swear to fucking god I will put your head through the steering wheel," Billy says, low and dangerous, his eyes never leaving the dashboard in front of him. "Drive."

Steve does.

Billy makes him stop on Hillcrest, two streets over from Old Cherry Road, where his actual house is. "S far enough. Let me out here."

Feeling hopeless and angry at the same time, Steve complies. What else can he do? Billy opens the door, starts to struggle out of his borrowed jacket, one of Steve's old ones.

"Jesus, just keep the jacket, man," Steve says. "It's cold, and you, you've got a long walk."

"You can't save everybody, Saint Jude," Billy says again, shaking his head. For a moment, he lingers, looking like he wants to say something else, but then he just shakes his head again and climbs out. They both hang there for a moment: Billy, inscrutable, standing beside the car, so the line of roof hides everything from the shoulders up, and Steve, one hand on the wheel, the other clenched on his own knee, just waiting, hoping, *pleading* internally that Billy will change his mind and just...climb in, let Steve take him back home.

Finally, Billy thumps the roof of the car twice, leans down, looks Steve in the eyes and says, "Hey, Harrington?"

"Yeah?"

“If I find out you told anyone about this, I’ll make what I did to you last year look like it was *nothing*. Same goes for your bratty little shadow too. You got me?”

It’s like Steve’s had the breath punched out of him. “I—I—you—” he stutters.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Billy says. He thumps the roof one last time for emphasis. Then he slams the door, and he’s gone. Steve doesn’t stay to watch him walk away.

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Steve goes home.

He reheats Mrs. Henderson’s chili and spends thirty minutes pushing it around his bowl before he finally dumps it in the trash, bowl and all.

He sits down in front of the TV, puts in a movie. When the credits roll, he can’t even remember what he watched.

He picks up the stack of books still sitting on the floor, re-shelves them in the office.

Then he finds himself back on the couch with one slim red volume still in his hand. Sonnets. He opens it, but when he turns the pages, his eyes slide uselessly across the words, unable to make sense of anything.

He thinks about pulling the stopper on the air mattress, rolling it back up, and replacing it in the closet. Then he thinks about ripping a hole in it and throwing the deflated remains out the back door.

He doesn’t do either.

He thinks about calling Dustin. Doesn’t. Thinks about calling Hopper. Picks up the phone. Hangs it up again.

He itches. Not his skin, but underneath his skin.

He tries to get comfortable, but can't. He's numb, but not numb enough.

He goes upstairs to take a shower. Looks at himself, at his own naked body in the mirror, can't meet his own eyes. Opens a drawer, uses what's inside that drawer to do a *thing* to his body. Finishes, replaces the object and closes the drawer again.

He savors the burn he feels when he steps into the shower. Revels in the numbness it brings inside.

He thinks about lighting another fire. Thinks about turning the heat low. Thinks about sleeping on the air mattress under a warm pile of blankets. Thinks involuntarily about a house on Old Cherry Road, and what might be happening there at this moment. Decides not to think any more tonight. Deflates the air mattress and stows it back in the closet where it belongs. Goes upstairs, lies down in his own bed. Falls asleep. Doesn't think anymore. For a little while.

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Twelve hours of sleep and he's still tired before he even opens his eyes. He sits up, bewildered for one blessed moment, before memories of the last three and a half days (was it really only three and a half days?) come rushing back to assault him.

It already doesn't feel real. Spending time in Billy Hargrove's presence, talking to him, calling him *friend* (and meaning it there for a minute), it all feels like a fever dream—like he smoked some bad shit and Billy Hargrove's bloodied face haunting his house was the hallucinatory result. A fucking nightmare.

*...You can't save everybody, Saint Jude*

*...If I find out you told anyone about this, I'll make what I did to you last year look like it was nothing.*

Fuck him. Fuck *everything*.

There's wetness under his hip. He lifts the covers. *Shit*. He's bled onto the sheets. He must have pressed too hard last night. Familiar shame floods him. Great. *Great*. He just woke up, and the day's already a shitshow.

He considers not even going to school. But the only thing worse than going would be staying here. Alone. So he settles for getting there late. Skips going to his locker.

By fourth period English, Steve's overheard three different stories about Billy fucking Hargrove. He's here today. Looks like his dad didn't kill him after all.

By the water fountain: *Did you hear? Billy Hargrove got caught with a married woman! By her HUSBAND. You should see the other guy.*

At the line of urinals in the boy's bathroom: *Dude. Have you seen Billy Hargrove's face? Heard he got into it with the bouncer at the roadhouse out on 99. Yeah, you should see the other guy.*

In the lunch line: *Oh my god, did you see Billy Hargrove's face? I bet he got into it with Steve Harrington again. Wonder how bad Harrington looks?*

This one comes from two girls in front of him who didn't notice when he joined the line, and Steve can't help but snort loudly when he hears it. *Un-fucking-believable*.

"Sorry to disappoint. Wasn't me," he says, when they both turn to look at him. They both speedwalk away, whispering furiously, and Steve wonders what the next rumor will be. Decides he doesn't care.

He finally sees the guy in English. Well. *Sees* is a generous word. He's aware of him. Peripherally. It's impossible not to be—it's like the guy has his own gravitational field, and a good quarter of the class is drawn into it, gathering around him to...bask, Steve assumes.

Whatever.

They've been reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for a week. And

Steve has hated every minute of it so far. He still hates it today. But today...it kinda makes sense. They're reading the part where Helena and Hermia fight and, for once he kinda gets it. He ignores the parts that makes his head spin—all the doth's, and thou's, and thee's—and listens for the beats, the ones that tell the story. And he *hears* it. Some of it, at least.

Not that it fucking matters.

He considers skipping practice that afternoon, not sure why he's even still playing at all. It's not like he cares. But he always gives Dustin a ride after AV Club on Thursdays, and if he skips, it's not like there's actually anything to do, except go home, which...no. So he stays.

He pretty much half-asses his way through practice. What else is new these days? He doesn't really care, he's just going through the motions, because it's something to do. Besides, not like he's the only one phoning it in today. Looks like Hargrove must still be sore, because he's moving slow. Slow for him, anyway. Steve doesn't know if it's because of the other guy's lack of enthusiasm, or because of Steve's own, or a combination of both, but the effect must be contagious, because the whole team is playing sub par today, missing gimme passes and whiffing when they should be sinking their shots. When coach finally blows the whistle at the end of practice, it's clear he knows it too.

"Alright, that's it jackwagons, hit the freaking showers!" he bellows. "And find your balls when you're in there, make sure the ice storm didn't freeze 'em off! Because you're playing like a bunch of GIRLS! Come back tomorrow with your heads in the game or you're all running suicides until you PUKE!"

Steve takes his time in the locker room. He has no desire to deal with Tommy or any of his old cohort. And he definitely doesn't care to have to deal with Billy fucking Hargrove right now.

But he must have pissed off someone Upstairs, because as his luck would have it recently, what he *desires* and what he *gets* are two entirely different things. He's just dunked his head under the spray when he hears footsteps headed his way. He pushes the wet fall of his bangs out of face, and sees, *of fucking course*, Billy fucking Hargrove

joining him at the shower column.

*You have got to be kidding me*, he thinks at whatever apathetic deity is probably ignoring him at the moment. He angles the right side of his body away from Billy, doing his best to pretend like he's not there.

"Well good afternoon to you too, St. Jude," Billy says.

Steve ignores him, racing to hit the high spots with soap so he can just rinse off and get out of here. He doesn't even bother to turn the water off, just turns on his heel and walks off when he's done.

"Hey!" Billy says, when Steve doesn't acknowledge him. "HEY, jackass, I'm talking to you!" He gives Steve a small shove to the shoulder from behind.

Alright, that's it. Steve turns to face him, gritting his teeth, finally letting the anger he's felt for the last twenty-four hours blaze through his body, momentarily forgetting why he should keep the right side of his body angled away.

"WHAT. The fuck. Do *you* want?" he asks.

But Billy's not looking at his face. His eyes are cast lower, zeroing in on Steve's right hip. *Shit*. Steve slaps a hand over the stripes there.

"What the hell happened to you, Harrington?" Billy says, his eyes wide.

No. No, he's got no right. What Steve does to Steve's body is no one's business but his own.

Besides, it's obvious why Billy also waited to shower after everyone else. Taking a page out of Billy's own playbook, Steve deflects, reaching out to poke the ugly bruise spreading in shades of purple and green over the left side of his ribs. "Looks like we've both got something to hide, huh?"

Billy hisses and steps back out of Steve's reach. Betrayal blooms on the other boy's face, and for a moment, a sick pain twinges in Steve's belly. But the betrayal on Billy's face is quickly replaced by an expression that's much more familiar to Steve: anger.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Harrington?” he barks.

“Not a goddamn thing you should be worried about,” Steve mutters as he walks away again, grabbing a towel off the rack and tucking it tightly around his hips. But the satisfaction he feels at having the last word is short-lived. He can hear Billy stalking after him, so close Steve expects to feel his breath ruffling the wet hair at the back of his neck. He’s almost to his locker when the shove finally comes, two hands between his shoulder blades that send him stumbling, *hard*.

He nearly goes down, but just manages to keep his feet, whirling to stare incredulously at the jackass who has just laid hands on him. Again. “What the hell is your PROBLEM?” he snarls.

“That’d be *you*,” Billy growls back.

He shouldn’t, Steve *knows* he shouldn’t, but for once, he feels no need to rein it in. “Aw come on, really?” Steve asks. “We both know you’ve got so many, there’s no way I’m even *near* the top of the list.”

There’s a kind of horrified satisfaction that fills him, after. He lets the smugness show, lets one corner of his mouth tip up, just a little, and then isn’t even a little bit surprised when Billy runs him back against the lockers, using the weight of his own body to hold him there. “Violence? From you, Hargrove? What a shock—” The end of the word is cut off, the breath stuttering out of him as Billy pulls him up by the shoulders and slams him back again, even harder.

“Coward,” he wheezes, knowing he’s going to pay the price for that one, even as he says it. “*Pussy*.”

“Shut your big fucking MOUTH, Harrington!” Billy grabs his face in one hand, fingers digging in, as he draws the other hand back in a fist. There it is. *Do it*.

“DO IT,” Steve spits. But Billy just hangs there, fist in midair, shaking. His eyes are wild, blue fire. Their bodies are pressed together, and Billy’s is vibrating with rage and adrenaline, and is he—is that—is that a half-chub pressing against Steve’s hip? Is Billy getting *hard* from this?



He lets his eyes drop, looking briefly down at the naked body pressed against his. Billy hadn't even bothered to put a towel on before following Steve out of the shower. They're pressed so close to each other that Steve can't really see anything below his waist, but the other boy's chest is heaving, and his mouth is open, and when their eyes meet again, Billy lets his fist drop. There's something about his face. He looks...almost...almost *scared*. But he doesn't let go of Steve's jaw, instead bringing his other hand up to brace against the locker beside Steve's head, and...and...

Coach walks in. "What the hell are you ladies still doing here?"

In one swift movement, Billy pushes away from Steve and turns his back, grabbing his own towel off the bench and tucking it around his waist. His back heaves with great, gasping lungfuls of air. He doesn't turn back around.

"Sorry Coach," Steve says, running a hand through his wet hair. He pushes away from the locker so he's standing up straight. "Just had some issues we had to iron out."

"Well iron 'em out on your own time," Coach gripes. "I don't have the time or the patience to referee your little soap opera. Your team doesn't need this shit. And get that looked at Harrington. I don't like having to bleach my towels twice." He walks away, and Steve looks down at his hip, where Coach had nodded, to see a bright line of red bleeding through the towel. *Shit*.

Billy's turned back to look. Sees it too. "What the hell is *wrong* with you, Harrington?" He twirls a finger distantly in the direction of his temple, like he's asking two questions at once.

"A lot," Steve answers. "How about you?"

Billy doesn't answer, just takes his own clothes out of his locker and walks away.

At home that night, Steve finds that he can't stop thinking about the feeling of Billy pressed against his hip, half-hard. He knows it didn't mean anything—guys get semis for strange reasons all the time, *especially* when they're in a fight. Hell, Steve had one himself after the fight with the demo dogs. He'd had to re-adjust himself in the dark on the school bus so he wouldn't look like a perv in front of a bunch of kids. He wasn't turned on, he was fucking scared to death. But his body couldn't tell the difference. No way Billy Hargrove was getting off on their fight. Well, knowing Hargrove, maybe he *was* getting off on the fight. But he wasn't getting off on *Steve*.

Not like Steve cares. It's just weird, is all. That's the only reason he can't stop turning it over in his head.

He's still replaying it when he goes to bed that night.

He wakes the next morning to wetness underneath him on the sheets again. *You've gotta be kidding me*. He bandaged his hip better, he knows he did! The bleeding should have stopped by now. But he lifts the sheets and looks and...*what the fuck?* The wetness isn't just in the sheets, it's in his Calvin's too, and...oh. That's not blood.

What the fuck?

He can't even remember the dream! Well, not exactly. He has a vague memory of his skin slipping against someone else's naked skin, hot breath on his neck, a low voice purring his name, "...*Harrington*..." Oh no. Nope. Nope. No. No way did he dream that. Nuh-uh. Fuck that.

The sheets go in the washer (for the second day in a row) and the memories of his weird dream go into a box inside his head clearly labelled DO NOT TOUCH, right beside the memories of dark underground tunnels and flickering lights inside the Byers house.

What in the *hell* is going on with him?

The whole thing throws Steve off his game so hard he's almost late for class a second day in a row. His morning doesn't get any less weird though, when he gets to school. It actually gets weirder. He'd never made it to his locker yesterday, too late to go in the morning

and too messed up in the head after the run-in with Billy to give a damn about going back at the end of the day.

When he opens his locker this morning, a heavy bundle falls out, right onto his shoe. It's his jacket, the fleece-lined one he'd loaned Bil- *Hargrove* when he'd taken him home on Wednesday. It's not a surprise the guy had managed to break into his locker—the hardware at Hawkins is old and notoriously easy to manipulate. It is, however, a surprise that he'd try. To give back a jacket? Does he really hate the thought of holding on to something of Steve's that badly?

But no. The jacket falls onto his foot with enough force to *hurt*. There's something wrapped protectively inside, giving it extra heft. Steve picks it up and carefully unwraps it, revealing...a book. The hell? The cover has a picture of a disembodied hand in the foreground, fingers curled and thumb outstretched, and in the background there's a green...planet-thing (maybe?) with arms, sticking its tongue out. The title says *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and the thing is *very* well-worn. Well-loved actually, by the looks of it, with a cracked spine and foxed edges. When Steve opens it, trying to figure out what the hell Billy Hargrove meant by leaving him a *book*, of all things, a note flutters out. It reads:

*Jude,*

*You're not a big fan of reading. I get it. But try this one. You'll dig it. It's better than Shakespeare.*

-B

*PS- Thanks.*

Steve's...lost. Hargrove had made it clear that they were done when Steve took him home on Wednesday. That there's no bond of friendship between them—never was. They were just a couple of guys who got snowed in together and let cabin fever and the influence of a couple mind-altering substances create a false bond that should have never existed.

Unless...unless maybe he regretted what he'd said? But then...why would he say it at *all*? Why would he be so cruel? And why did he practically threaten to rip Steve's head off in the showers yesterday, only to put this shit in his locker this morning? Unless...Oh.

Steve thinks maybe he gets it then. He's always been a little slow on the uptake. Billy didn't put all this stuff in his locker today—he did it *yesterday*, when Steve didn't bother to check to his locker all day. And then Steve picked a fight with him after practice, when Billy was trying to talk to him. Maybe *just* talk to him. Maybe clear the air from Wednesday, after leaving a peace offering in his locker that Steve didn't actually find.

*Fuck.*

Steve puts his head in his locker and groans.

He spends the day in a confused haze. At lunchtime, he grabs a bag of chips and eats in his car, unable to summon the fortitude to deal with Nancy and Jonathan today. He skips English too. For obvious reasons.

Once he's out of school, he lacks the motivation to go back. He hadn't wanted to be alone, but being around people doesn't make him feel any better either. He decides to just play hooky for the rest of the day. What's the school going to do? Call his parents?

When he pulls out of the parking lot, he doesn't go home. Can't. So he just keeps driving.

The wheels in his brain won't quit spinning. Did he misread the situation? Had they actually forged some weird semblance of a friendship after all? Or is he reading too much into Billy's little present? The guy pretty much threatened to kill him on Wednesday!

Steve glances over at his glove compartment. There's a dark streak of dried blood smeared across the front. Billy's blood, where he'd punched the dash until his knuckles split open. Steve thinks back, remembering Billy's hands, and the way they'd trembled afterwards. He must have been so terrified to face his monster of a father. Steve would have been.

So he drives for hours, criss-crossing back and forth, traversing almost every road in town, until the sun sets and darkness falls. He thinks about driving past the city limits, hitting the highway and not stopping, but he doesn't. He can't. Because he knows there's a part of him, deep down, that wants to just keep driving, put Hawkins in his rearview for good. Passing that city limits sign without something to make him come back? Bad idea.

Hours later, when the moon is has risen, Steve heads for home. He dreads it, but what else is there to do? He's still no clearer about the Billy situation than he was when he left school today. All he knows is that he's way out of his depth. But it's not like there's anyone he can talk to about this. Dustin, maybe, if he were older...but he's not, and there's no way Steve's gonna lay any of this crap on a kid.

In a fit of frustration, he actually pulls out the book Billy had left for him. He reads Billy's note again. *Try this one. You'll dig it. It's better than Shakespeare.*

Lacking anything better to do, he cracks the book open and starts reading. It's weird...but it's also kind of...not bad? Steve isn't a fast reader, he's not even really a *good* reader, so it's slow going, but from what he can gather, it's the story of a guy whose whole planet is destroyed, so he basically goes out looking for another one. Sort of. It's weird. But also funny? It reads easier than anything Steve has ever tried to study for school, that's for sure. He falls asleep with the book on his chest.

The next day is Saturday, which means it's time for Steve to go pick up Dustin. At Mrs. Henderson's request, the two of them drive to the hardware store to pick up a snowblower and sundry other implements, so they can manage the wreck the snow had made of the Henderson's yard.

Steve knows it's coming, knows there's no way to avoid it, but his heart still gives a jolt when Dustin says, "So, Steve. You said you couldn't explain everything when I was at your house. How about now? Why were you and that son of a bitch sleeping together when I came over on Wednesday?"

Steve facepalms (not the best decision when he's driving, he knows, but...Jesus, Dustin). "He—we were *not* SLEEPING TOGETHER Dustin!"

"Yeah? Because it definitely looked like the two of you were sharing a mattress, Steve," Dustin points out.

And okay, the kid has a point. "Dustin, we've been over this: yes, *technically*, we were sleeping together. But only in the most technical sense of the world! Sleeping. Like I said before, the power was out, and it was only warm in front of the fireplace, so we were sharing the air mat—"

"But why was he even THERE, Steve?" Dustin glowers, looking severely disappointed.

"It's kind of hard to explain, pal. When you're young, everything is black and white, but sometimes you realize—"

"Steve! Are you actually about to pull a 'you'll understand it when you're older' on me? Because I know what sex is, and I even know about gay sex, but that guy is AWFUL!"

"Dustin! I'm not having sex with him! Of the gay variety or any other!" Steve yelps. What the hell?

"Well, what other variety would it be?"

"It's not...oh my god!" They pull into the parking lot and Steve takes a moment to count to ten. He sighs, leaning over and resting his forehead on the steering wheel. Finally, he lifts it to look at Dustin and say, "For the last time, I AM NOT having sex with Billy Hargrove."

"Then why was he at your house?" Dustin asks, undeterred.

Steve hesitates. It's not his story to tell. He tells Dustin as much. "That's what I meant by things not being so black and white when you're older." Only, didn't they seem pretty black and white two days ago? And in a way, it IS his story to tell. Kinda. Besides, he can see in Dustin's face that he's not going to be satisfied anyway with only half the story.

He ignores the ominous echo of Billy's voice playing in his head: *If I find out you told anyone about this, I'll make what I did to you last year look like it was nothing. Same goes for your bratty little shadow too.*

Holding up a hand up to stave off the protest he can see Dustin working up to, he says, "Okay, look, the thing is, Billy's dad...he hits him. A lot, I think. And it's...it's bad. You got a look at his face Wednesday, so you know." Dustin winces hard at that, but Steve knows he can't stop now. "Max called me after I dropped you guys off from the D&D tournament, and asked for my help. She couldn't tell me much, just where I needed to go. She led me to Billy. He was alone, out in the cold near her house, no car, no jacket. And I started to get it then. He was hurt...really bad, so—"

"So you took him home and you took care of him. You made him better," Dustin finishes for him.

Well, he's half right. But the last thing Steve wants to do is tell Dustin about the stuff that happened after he left on Wednesday, so he just says, "Sort of. Close enough."

"Does..." Dustin hesitates, his eyes shiny. "Does Billy's dad hurt Max?"

Steve shakes head. "Billy and Max have each told me that he leaves her alone. I think he treats the two of them...very differently." There's no way to say what Billy told him—about Neil favoring Max—without sounding like he's downing Max. And Steve isn't about to do that. It's not Max's fault that Neil treats her well while he treats Billy like shit, and even so, there's no way living with a stepdad like that guy can be a walk in the park for her either. He remembers hearing what she said to Lucas on the bus in the junkyard—about missing her own dad. He can fill in the blanks.

"That *son of a bitch*," Dustin says. Steve looks at him. "Their dad," Dustin clarifies. "No one's dad should treat them like that," he frowns, looking at his shoes. Claudia and Dustin never mention Dustin's dad, and Steve has never asked. Now he wonders.

"Dustin..." Steve hesitates. He can't ask Dustin not to tell anyone. It's too shitty to lay something like that on a kid. And it wouldn't take anyway. So he just says, "You and the rest of the party....I know you're good at keeping secrets, when it's to protect someone else. I can't ask you not to tell the other guys. I won't. But Billy, he doesn't want anyone else to know. We have to respect his wishes."

"But Hopper's the chief! He could help!" Dustin protests.

"I already talked to Hopper. Sort of. It's just...not that simple. And Billy's scared of cops. There's no way to make him talk to someone if he doesn't want to. And he doesn't want to. He's made that clear. He just wants to stick it out until graduation." Steve feels a little sick, repeating Billy's own reasoning back to Dustin, hearing the holes in the logic.

Dustin hears it too. "But what's going to keep his dad from hurting him between now and then Steve?"

Steve shakes his head helplessly. He doesn't have an answer.

"He's still a jerk, but even jerks don't deserve that. We have to help him," Dustin says matter-of-factly. Black and white reasoning. Steve envies it.

Thing is, he's not wrong.

Dustin agrees not to say anything about the Billy situation to anyone outside of the party, with the condition that Steve help them when they figure out a way to keep Max and Billy safe. The last time Steve said no to the kids' rescue plans, he still ended up in a warren of underground tunnels, running from demodogs. He knows better than to disagree.

Besides, Steve can't shake the feeling (or the *guilt*), that he should be doing something about it himself. But he doesn't know what.



Soon enough, he figures it out.

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He's up late Sunday night, watching another movie, and when the doorbell rings, Steve knows. He just *knows*.

It's completely dark outside, no moon in sight, but when he opens the door, the light spilling from the house is enough to show Steve he's right. The late night doorbell ringer is none other than one Billy Hargrove. He's hanging back by the stairs, away from the door, like he's unsure, and he's too far away from the light for Steve to make out much more than the unmistakable shape of him.

"...Hey," Steve says.

"Hey," comes the reply, a low rasp.

But Billy still doesn't move any closer, so Steve flips on the porch light. Billy flinches away like the light hurts him, turning his face from Steve. Past him, Steve can make out the hulking, haphazard shape of the Camaro, parked so its front wheels are in the grass and the ass of the car is still back on the pavement. Billy's holding a duffel bag, half-concealed behind his body, but he still won't turn back to look at Steve.

"Billy?" Steve prods.

Long moments pass, then finally he turns towards the light.

Steve's all too familiar with the sight of blood on Billy's face at this point, but it doesn't make it any less of an awful sight, and Steve doesn't quite succeed at suppressing his wince.

Billy's not as demolished as he was last weekend, but that's not saying much. The split in his lip has reopened, wider this time, Steve thinks. Dried blood coats his chin, starting to flake. Some has dripped onto his shirt, and there's a patch of it across his jaw too, smeared

messy and dark, like he'd tried to wipe it away and only ended up making it worse. It's the only new wound Steve can see, but it's bad enough on its own. Besides, Steve knows from experience now—Billy's dad is good at inflicting wounds in ways that aren't immediately visible. And the wounds are worse for it.

"You were right," Billy rasps, his eyes dark. "Happy now?"

"No," Steve says. Of course he's not! "Jesus Billy, I'm sor—"

"Don't need your pity, Harrington. I just..." Billy looks down, scuffs his shoe against the concrete. "I tried to sleep in the car, but it's too cold, and I-I can't go back there. I just need...I just need your couch for the night. I'll be gone in the morning." His teeth chatter as he talks and Steve shudders in sympathy at the thought of trying to sleep in his car in these temperatures.

Steve considers for a minute. "Yeah no, you'd need it for longer than that. Nighttime temps around here won't break freezing until late March. Maybe April. You...you can't sleep on the couch that long—"

Billy's face goes stricken for the briefest of moments, before he schools it into icy neutrality (or what passes for icy neutrality with Billy, so, anger). "Right. Got it." He turns to go, and Steve hurries to finish.

"I mean, it's too long for you to sleep on my *couch*, but you can have my guest room." He steps aside and opens the door wider. "If you want."

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"Sit down," Steve tells him, once they're in the living room. "I'll light the fire and turn the thermostat up so you can get warm." But Billy doesn't move. Gives no indication he's heard Steve at all. He seems lost.

"Billy...are you hurt?" Still no response. So Steve puts a tentative

hand on his shoulder. “Hey man, are you—”

Billy flinches, pushing Steve’s hand away. “No! Don’t...don’t fucking touch me. Please.”

Jesus, his fingers are freezing! Without thinking, Steve catches his hand between his own, cupping the cold fingers between his palms. “Whoa, your hands are like ice.” Then Billy’s words register, and Steve drops his hand. “...Shit, sorry.” Then he repeats his question. “Billy, buddy, you have to tell me right now: are you hurt?”

Billy shakes his head slowly, like he’s not entirely sure, as he sinks down onto the couch. “He only smacked me the one time. I’ve had worse.”

Steve knows. He’s seen worse. “Do you...” Steve hesitates, not sure if he should pry. But something’s *off* with Billy. More than usual. Steve doesn’t know what happened, but something is very wrong. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Steve starts to get up, so he can go turn up the central heat, when Billy says, “I don’t know why.”

“Why he hit you?” Steve sits back down, near him, but not touching, giving him space without straying too far.

“Why it bothered me so bad, that he did it. S’nothing new. He just...he said I wasn’t being *grateful* enough to Susan for the beautiful meal she’d cooked, and so I said, ‘*Gee thanks*, Susan,’ all saccharine and sweet, just like he fucking wanted, right? And he just...*bam!* Backhands me in the mouth. Right at the table. And everyone’s just sitting there, not moving. And I look down, and I see my own blood dripping onto the tablecloth, all these little red spots, and they were so bright against the white, and I thought, *he shouldn’t do this...*and I just...I fucking lost it.

“I told him I’d kill him, if he ever laid his hands on me again. I don’t even know why. It was nothing. His fist wasn’t even closed this time. But after I said it, no one said anything, and I thought, oh, no, he’s

gonna kill *me* now, not the other way around. But he didn't move.

“So I got up, and I went in my room, and I started packing my duffel, and then he was in my doorway. And I'm thinking: okay, here we go. Now he's gonna fuck me up. Because that's how it always goes. But he just stands there. And then I thought, oh, maybe he's going t-to, going to ask me not to leave, b-b-but he didn't do that either.” Billy laughs angrily, swipes so hard at his wet lashes he's practically slapping himself. “Then he just—do you know what he said? He said, ‘I knew there was something wrong with you, the minute we brought you home from the hospital. Your mother said you were perfect, but I *knew*.’ And then he just fucking...walked away.” Billy looks at Steve, eyes wide and helpless. Hopeless. “Who does that? Who says that to their own kid?”

“Jesus...” Steve says. He wants...he wants to put his arms around him. But he can't, so he says, “A cruel son of a bitch. One who doesn't deserve to have a kid. *That's* who says that. But Billy...you have to know it's not your fault, right?” Steve reaches out to lay a hand on his arm, but remembers at the last minute, and takes his hand back.

Billy doesn't say anything. Doesn't move.

“I'm not gonna touch you,” Steve promises. “Just...why don't you come upstairs? I'll show you where the bathroom up there is. You can take a shower. Wash the blood off. Get warm.”

Billy nods distractedly, but Steve gets almost halfway up the stairs before he notices Billy isn't following. He goes back to him. “Hey, come on buddy,” he coaxes.

“Huh?” Billy asks. He wavers in the middle of the floor, looking lost, the straps of his duffel bag held loosely in one hand. So Steve takes Billy's duffel from his hand, tosses it over his own shoulder. He tips his head towards the stairs. “Hot shower. Come on.” Billy follows this time.

Steve heads to his own bathroom. It's the only one upstairs, beside his parents' en suite. “The taps are tricky,” he explains as he leads Billy in, “I'll show you.”

“Yep,” Billy acknowledges. Doesn’t even look Steve’s way.

“Do you...is there anything you need?” he asks, just in case, as he leans over the tub, adjusting the water with care, until the temperature feels just right. He’s not surprised at the reply.

“No.”

“Okay,” he says, for the third (fourth?) time that night. He doesn’t want to push.

It’s a surprise then, when Billy says, “He took it all.”

Steve head shoots up. “What?”

Billy’s eyes are unfocused, as he strips un-self-consciously, unbuttoning his shirt, kicking off his shoes. “All my savings. He didn’t tell me how much I ‘owed him.’ He just took everything. And then all week, he just, he just kept *sneering* at me. Like I was shit on the bottom of his shoe. Like he can’t believe a piece of shit like me came from him. When he backhanded me at dinner, at the fucking *table*, I couldn’t take it anymore.” He rips his belt from its loops, starts undoing his pants.

“Shit.” Steve aches to step closer, to touch Billy, hug him, reassure him, *something*. Just...let him know he’s here. But even if Billy hadn’t made his preference about being touched explicitly clear, there’s the thing that happened between them in the locker room. Not even the part when Billy was pressed against him. Before that. The mean shit Steve said. And the fact that Billy is half naked now, and on his way to being all the way there. It’s not right. *Things* between them still aren’t right. And Steve doesn’t know how to get them there. So he just says, “I’ll go get the guest room ready. You just take your time. Call me if you need anything.”

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When Steve wakes the next morning, Billy’s gone. The guest room

bed is remade with military precision, and Steve could almost believe that he dreamed the whole thing, if it weren't for the duffel bag stowed at the foot of the bed, proof positive that not only was Billy here, but that he'll be back.

Steve had lain there in bed last night, after he'd left (okay, *fled*) the bathroom, listening to the sounds of the shower turn on and off, then hearing the door to the spare bedroom close. If Billy'd made any noises after that, he'd done it too quietly for Steve to detect.

Still, Steve had lain awake, thinking. Had he...did he do the right thing? His gut said "yes." Max, he thought, would say "yes." Dustin would too. But still, he'd wondered.

It's just that he's not sure this is going to work. And okay, it's not like Steve's parents are going to be the problem. He'll be lucky if they make it home for his graduation in June, and Billy will probably be long gone by then. But Billy's only here, with *Steve*, because he knows Steve's safe (or because he knows Steve's a sucker, some cruel part of his brain whispers), not because he actually trusts him. Not because he *likes* him. *Definitely* not because they're friends. And yet...Steve just offered him a home with him for the next couple months. Not like he could let the guy freeze to death, but...how the hell is this going to work?

He'd fallen asleep without figuring out the answer.

And he's no wiser when he wakes.

The school day is normal. Like, surprisingly so, considering that Steve feels like his life has somehow just been irreversibly upended. But he goes to class, he eats lunch with Nancy and Jonathan (they're in their own world, as usual), he goes to practice, and...nothing happens. Steve doesn't know what he was expecting TO happen, but he spends the whole day waiting for...something. Some recognizable shift. Some mysterious thing that never comes.

He barely sees Billy all day, and when he does, Billy doesn't acknowledge that Steve even exists, not in English, not at practice, and definitely not in the locker room after. That, Steve supposes, is its own small kind of shift. Billy acts like Steve isn't in the room, and

for once, Tommy and his big mouth do the same.

He and Billy exchange words for the first time when Steve's doorbell rings that night. It's late, a little past nine, and Billy looks exhausted. He smells of sweat and engine oil, and there's a faint smear of grease streaked across his forehead, and another smudge on his cheek.

"Are you moonlighting as an extra in a Billy Joel video?" Steve asks, trying for a joke.

"No Harrington, some of us actually have to work for a living," Billy grunts, collapsing onto the couch.

"I know; I was just kidding. You know, humor? Jokes?" Steve's testing the waters. If he and Billy are going to be sharing the same space, they're going to have to talk to each other at some point. There had been moments, when they were snowed in together last week, where it felt like they'd really *clicked*. Steve had been hoping to find that wavelength again. But maybe it was just a fluke.

Billy drags a grimy hand down his face. "Yeah, I know jokes Harrington. In case you hadn't noticed, my whole life's a joke."

"O-kay. Long day?" Steve asks.

"What do *you* think?" Billy returns.

Steve thinks he's never seen another teenager look so tired. "Fine. I'll leave you alone then." Then he remembers, "Oh, but hey! I almost forgot—I've got something for you. So you won't have to ring the door bell anymore." Steve fishes his spare key from his pants pocket, and passes it over.

Billy takes the key from Steve, his face incredulous and suspicious at the same time. "You serious right now?"

"I mean...yeah?" Steve shrugs. "I told you you could stay as long as you needed. You're going to need a key if I'm not here to answer the door. No big deal."

"Right." Billy blinks. "No big deal. Are you actually trying for sainthood or are you just that dumb?"

“...No?”

“Are you scared of me then? Is that it? I kicked your ass once, and you’re scared I’m going to do it again?”

“What the hell? No.”

“Then why are you helping me?”

“Because...because I don’t like the alternative.” *Because we might have been friends, once.*

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Living with Billy is strange. It’s like Billy’s trying to pretend that he’s not actually staying with Steve—not just to the rest of the world, Tommy and Carol and the rest of Hawkins HS society worshipping at his feet, but like he’s trying to pretend it in his own head too. And in truth, it almost works, because Steve barely sees him. When they’re at school, Billy pretends not to notice Steve. At home, Billy comes in late from his job at some garage, and usually leaves again before Steve’s up. They don’t talk in public and they barely interact in private either. It’s like that weird, soul-baring, snowed-in week together never happened at all.

In a way, Steve gets it. He’d done something similar, after the fight in November, back when he’d rather have pretended that Billy didn’t exist, than look at him and feel the shame and anger of the last time they interacted, that night in the Byers house. And that’s it, he thinks: Billy can’t forgive him for seeing him at his most vulnerable, not only once, but twice.

But as hard as Billy’s trying to pretend that everything’s the same as it ever was, Steve can see the cracks. Unfortunately, he thinks he’s maybe the only person in Billy’s life (if you can call him that) who can.

Billy’s just...not *there*. Sure, he’s in the hallway, and the lunchroom,



and the parking lot. His ass is in the seat in English class, and presumably all his other classes too. He runs the drills in basketball, makes the passes, takes the shots. But none of that's saying much. Because while Billy might be there physically, his presence—his *fire*, that fire that Steve has experienced firsthand, over and over again—is gone. It's not like Steve misses all the posturing and harassment thrown his way, but he never wanted to see this broken, wan version of Billy Hargrove either.

It all comes to a head about two weeks in, when Steve wakes to find \$40 lying on the kitchen counter, under a scrap of paper that says simply: "Rent." He asks Billy about it that afternoon, when he catches him in the deserted hallway on his way to practice.

Steve calls his name but Billy ignores him, so Steve hurries to catch up, catching him by the elbow, "Hey, wait a minute! Stop! What the hell was up with the money on the counter this morning?" Steve asks.

Billy jerks his arm out of Steve's grasp. "Didn't realize you had that much trouble reading, Harrington. Like the note said, it's rent."

"But why would you just leave \$40 lying on the counter? I don't...get it." Steve never asked Billy for rent. He doesn't *want* rent.

"Because my job pays for shit. A guy's gotta have money to pay for lunch and gas, and since the old man took my whole savings to replenish his wallet before I moved out, that's all I can afford to pay you right now."

There's so much *wrongness* to process in that statement, Steve can't even begin. His mouth just keeps working, "But—I don't...you don't..." but nothing of any relevance comes out. By the time he's able to prioritize the words, "I don't want you to do that!" Billy's walked away from him and is already halfway down the hall.

No. No way. Steve decides then and there, this shit isn't going to work.

It was bad enough when Billy just ignored him. But, whatever the hell is going on inside Billy Hargrove's messed up head, Steve has no

interest in being the new bad guy in Billy's life. The spoiled yuppie taking his cash. The piper he has to pay. Steve doesn't need it. Sure as hell doesn't want it. And the two of them can't keep going on like this—both acting like they're living with a bomb that's about to explode at any minute.

So he comes up with a plan.

The times they've been the most at ease around each other always seemed to involve one common element: mood altering substances. And that night when they'd smoked the weed was when things were the best. It's not like Steve *wants* to drug them both to work things out, but he needs to get Billy to soften long enough to make him listen.

Steve hasn't made a purchase in almost a year, but he still knows who sells the good shit, and his money spends the same, even if his reputation has taken a hit. No crappy, year-old ditch weed for the two of them this time around.

Now Steve just has to find a way to get Billy's attention long enough to convince him to smoke with him. His search takes him to the study, and the bookshelves that Billy had found so fascinating that night. He laughs when he sees it—the perfect fucking book, green cover and all.

He places two tightly rolled joints between the pages, leaves the book on Billy's bed, and settles in with yet another movie to pass the time. (Fast Times At Ridgemont High, he decides—just seems appropriate).

Billy comes through the door and ignores Steve as usual, tromping up the stairs to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him. And Steve waits.

He doesn't have to wait long.

He hears the door being yanked open, and hard footsteps coming down the hall before Billy appears to stomp his way down the stairs. And he looks...pissed?

“The fuck is this?” he asks, brandishing the book.

“Um, a book?” Steve says.

“Is this a fucking joke?” Billy asks, moving closer until he blocks Steve’s view of Phoebe Cates and her little red bikini on the tv.

“No,” Steve says patiently. “It’s a *book*. Why would you think it’s a joke?”

“Walt fucking Whitman? What the fuck are you trying to say, Harrington?” Billy demands, waving the book again, not the slightest bit pacified.

“I don’t kn—you know what, never mind, just give it to me,” Steve says, standing and taking the book from Billy’s unresisting hand. He opens it to reveal the two joints tucked inside. “Get it? Leaves of *Grass*? It’s a joke—or NOT...not a *joke*, Jesus, just...a play on words? I thought you’d appreciate the sentiment, you know? Figured we could kick back, smoke these? Since we are, you know, living together?”

Billy sighs, runs a hand over his face. “Of course you wouldn’t know what...shit.” He looks ceilingward, shakes his head. “Shit man, m’sorry.”

Well *that’s* a first.

Billy continues, “I’m just so fucking tired from work and, just, just forget I fucking said anything, Harrington.”

Steve holds up one of the joints. “You know what I’ve heard is good for that?”

“I hate my old man,” Billy coughs around an exhale, sometime later, as he passes to Steve. They’re on the second joint, and also their second sleeve of Oreos, and neither one of them is feeling any pain right now, two pairs of feet kicked up on the coffee table because Steve can’t bring himself to give a shit whether his mom would care about the finish getting scratched right now.

“So he really took your whole life savings?” Steve asks, still

incredulous, even through the truly spectacular buzz he's got working right now.

"Yup," Billy pops the "p" sound. "Said it was to teach me a lesson. That I'd only know never to steal from him again if I knew what it felt like myself. But that wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was how he looked at me that whole week. He just fucking *sneered* every time he looked at me. Like he was disgusted, but also like...like he was amused by the whole thing too. I think he fucking gets off on hating me. Know it, actually. He told me...he said he *knew* something was wrong with me the day they brought me home from the hospital."

Billy's already told him this part, the night he came back, when they were in the bathroom and Steve was getting the shower ready, and Billy had just started stripping his clothes off and talking, rambling really, with those empty, haunted eyes. But Steve thinks maybe... maybe Billy had been so lost that night that he doesn't remember saying anything. So he just says, "That's not right, man. You didn't deserve that. I'm so sor—"

But Billy cuts him off, snapping, "Don't you dare say you're fucking sorry to me, Harrington. I'm the last person in the world you owe those words to. And maybe he's right. Maybe there *is* something wrong with me. Maybe I did deserve—"

"NO." Now it's Steve's turn to cut Billy off. "You don't deserve anything he's done. And...I am sorry. Really sorry." He is. In more ways than one. It makes Steve sick. That someone's parent would hurt them like that. And it makes him ever sicker, thinking that he might have added to it. Thinking about what he said in the locker room. Knowing he intentionally struck out to hurt Billy. Knowing the blow landed, even if it wasn't a physical one. Knowing that, in the moment, he had *liked* it.

Weed has a way of making Steve run off at the mouth. It's been so long since he's done any serious smoking that he'd almost forgotten. "I'm sorry your dad's a piece of shit, 'cause he is and no one should talk to their kid like that. And I'm sorry for what I said to you in the locker room too. Last week. You didn't deserve that either."

“See, shit like this is why you get your ass kicked all the time,” Billy replies.

“I don’t get my ass kicked for apolo—” Hang on a minute. “Oh my God! That was ONE TIME, and you cold-cocked me with a plate to the head!” Steve exclaims.

Billy makes the \*incorrect buzzer\* noise. “*Wrong!* Try again! You know Tommy *loves* to run his mouth. I heard about last year and how that weirdo Jonathan Byers kicked your ass, too. Ipso facto: you get your ass kicked *all the time*.”

“Okay, even if I did, which I *don’t*,” Steve argues, “It’s not because I know how to apologize!”

“Nah. It’s ‘cause you suck at fighting. And you don’t suck at fighting because you can’t throw a punch, speaking from personal experience. It’s because you won’t hurt people. You *don’t like* hurting people,” Billy drawls, exhaling smoke, staring at the cherry end of his joint.

“I don’t, and you do? Is that what you’re saying?”

“It’s not just me, Harrington. It’s everyone. *Everyone* likes hurting everyone else.”

Steve, who, for months now, has had the singular duty of playing chauffeur to, and looking out for the most irritating, meddling, heroic, *good*-hearted group of kids in possibly the history of the whole world, knows Billy’s wrong. “No, not everyone. There’s plenty of people out there who would rather help than harm. I’ve seen it.”

“Yeah, alright. Whatever. Maybe I’ll believe it too, if I ever see it.”

“Maybe you will. See it.”

Billy snorts. Stubs his roach out on an ugly Memphis Design coaster they’ve been using as a makeshift ashtray. “Doubtful.” He stands and stretches, his shirt riding up above his flat belly. “I’m beat. Thanks for the smoke, Harrington. I needed that. See you...later.”

Only, Steve hasn’t had a chance to even bring up the money thing yet. He stands quickly, before Billy can walk away, “Hey!”

Billy holds a deterring hand out. “Don’t. Don’t try to give me some happy hippie bullshit about how the world would be a better place if we all just *tried*. ‘Cause that’s the thing, Harrington. You think everyone’s like you. But they’re not. The world isn’t like you.”

“Alright,” Steve says. He knows this is a battle he isn’t going to win. There’s a more important one he’s about to fight anyway.

“Alright?” Billy’s eyebrows rise.

Steve shrugs. “Yeah. Here.” He holds out the \$40 he’d found on the counter yesterday. When Billy doesn’t move to take it, he steps forwards and, with two fingers, hastily tucks it down into Billy’s right front pocket.

“What’s the hell is this?” Billy frowns, looking down at Steve’s hand.

“I’m just...some spoiled rich yuppie who doesn’t get it, right? So, why pay me rent? Go ahead: fuck me over. Fuck my rich dad over. Let him foot the bills. If...if you can’t stick it to your dad, try sticking it to mine instead. Yeah?” Steve’s eyes meet Billy’s intent blue ones, and he waits for his next move. Holds still as a statue. Barely breathes.

“Harrington?” Billy says, his voice hushed.

“Yeah?” *Please, please just go with it.*

“Your hand’s still in my pocket.”

Steve looks down to see two of his fingers are still tucked down in the snug denim, the back of his first two knuckles pressed flush against the sharp jut of Billy’s hip bone. Heat floods his face. “Oh,” he says, wincing as he hastily takes his hand back.

Billy raises an eyebrow, before turning and heading for the stairs. “I really don’t get you, man,” he tosses back.

“You don’t say,” Steve tells the empty room.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

In this chapter, the brief reprieve from the real world that the boys have been experiencing while snowed in together comes to an end. With that comes a lottttt of conflict, and some ugly words that neither of them mean. It's revealed to the reader that a character (Steve) has been cutting himself as a way to deal with his loneliness/pain. While the act is alluded to a couple of times in the chapter, it is never shown explicitly "on-screen." Please exercise caution/practice self care if you think this may be triggering for you.

Edited to add: Someone asked me why Billy was pissed that Steve left the book *Leaves of Grass* on his bed, and I realized I'd momentarily forgotten that not everyone spent their formative years being a total poetry slut like me. So, a brief history lesson: *Leaves of Grass* was a volume of poetry published in 1855. It was quite scandalous for its time because of its overt references to sex and sexuality. But more importantly, and this is where Billy comes in, it's been widely speculated (read: all but confirmed) that Walt Whitman, the author of *Leaves*, was gay (or possibly bisexual). You can read up on his poetry and relationships for more information, but let's put it this way, when Oscar Wilde himself says of his experience meeting the aforementioned gentleman, "I have the kiss of Walt Whitman still on my lips," it's fairly safe to assume the dude was into other dudes.

If you have any questions, my inbox is always open on Tumblr at LaVeraceVia. You can also follow me there for random musings and (occasional) fic meta, like the deleted scene from Drive that I posted yesterday.

As always, thanks so much for reading! Feedback is love!

## 8. Interlude: Who's Gonna Come Around

### Summary for the Chapter:

*...Nancy doesn't have her grandfather's nose for the weather, but she can still sense when there's a storm coming. She feels one on the way now. And somehow she knows, Steve's caught in the middle.*

Nancy tries to help. Steve tries to explain. Billy...well, Billy's just Billy.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Pretty sure this is the shortest chapter I posted so far, yet it's also the one that gave me the most grief. I fought and fought with this little bastard, and thought I'd never get it where I wanted, until I stumbled across Susan Dennard's "Magical Cookie" technique. Writer friends, if you're stuck, Google it. It's a lifesaver.

Trigger/content warnings in the end notes.

Something is up with Steve. Strictly speaking, something has kind of *been* up with Steve. Since last November.



But this is different.

Sure, he's been a little distant since everything that happened last November, but that's really only normal. They did break up, after all. And okay, on top of the fact that he's quieter and more self-contained these days, Nancy does sometimes look at him and think it feels a little like he's sleepwalking. Like maybe the most vibrant parts of him have taken an indefinite sabbatical, and maybe she had a hand in it. But that's ridiculous. Nothing's actually *wrong* with Steve. He still comes over to her house, only now to pick up Dustin (and sometimes Mike and all their other friends too), rather than Nancy herself. He still sits with her (and now Jonathan) at lunch. He's still a part of her life, just as a friend, rather than as her boyfriend. He's still *Steve*. And he's totally fine!

Or...he was, at least.

Now, there's definitely something up with Steve. He's not just distant anymore; now he's outright evasive, cagey. She asks him how his weekend was and he mumbles platitudes about the weather, changes the subject. She invites him to come hang out with them, and he declines. She asks him what his upcoming plans are, and he deftly sidesteps the question with one of his own. Though there's not a lot of evidence to go on, Nancy's convinced he's up to something, or caught up in something, and she has a feeling that whatever that something is, it's somehow very Not Good.

Don't ask her how she knows, she just does. She has a sense for these things. Always has, really. It's like...when she was a little girl, before her granddad passed away, he always used to tell her he could smell an approaching storm in the air, could taste the coming snow on the back of his tongue. The weatherman would still be calling for a "slight chance of flurries," and Grandpa would be off at the store buying rock salt and extra firewood. Everyone thought he was crazy, but the funny thing was: he was never wrong.

Nancy doesn't have her grandfather's nose for the weather, but she can still sense when there's a storm coming. She feels one on the way now. And somehow she knows, Steve's caught in the middle.

It starts, appropriately enough, the same week that the big ice storm

rolls over Hawkins, knocking out the power and bringing the town to a standstill from Saturday night through most of the day Wednesday.

She first notices the change in Steve when they return to school. He skips lunch Thursday AND Friday, and she only catches sight of him once that whole week. It's the end of the day Thursday, and she's standing at her locker when she sees Steve headed her way; she throws up a hand to wave, but he doesn't even see her. His eyes are bright with...some unsettling emotion—a combination of concern and dismay, from the look of his furrowed brow and his quick, agitated gait. Whatever it is causing him to look like that, one thing is for sure: Steve's definitely not sleepwalking anymore.

She puzzles over it, but in the end decides to let it go.

Then Steve rejoins them for lunch the next week. He contributes little to the conversation, but that's nothing new—Steve isn't much of a talker these days. He seems alright otherwise, the distraught look having left his eyes. Except...there's the way he keeps scanning the cafeteria with intent, searching for something. Or *someone*. But who?

She gets her answer a couple weeks later, at the home basketball game vs. Banford. She's there with Jonathan, each of them attending for less than voluntary reasons: she's doing a write-up on the game for the school newspaper, and Jonathan's taking photos for the yearbook. Admittedly, Nancy's attention has started to wander; Banford is dominating the game, and there's not exactly much to write about when your home team is losing so spectacularly. Nothing her classmates will want to read, anyway. Which is why she almost misses it: the quick, reassuring clap Steve gives Billy Hargrove on his shoulder after he sinks a shot. The brief pause that follows. The quick, halting nod that finally comes in return. Is that a shiver she sees race across Billy Hargrove's shoulders, after? Can't be. Can it?

For a moment, Nancy wonders if she's imagined the whole thing. It's so weird, so...unexpected. But no. If there's one thing Nancy Wheeler has learned in the last year, it's to trust her instincts. Sure, it's just a few small, meaningless gestures—or rather, it *would* be, if the two people involved weren't Steve Harrington and *Billy Hargrove*.

She wasn't there, but she knows what went down between the two of

them that awful night last November in the Byers' house. She *has* been there for the interactions since, and has never once seen anything resembling the odd spark of camaraderie she just witnessed pass between them.

Billy hadn't said a word to Steve since the night they fought, has never laid a finger on him since, as far as Nancy is aware. She knows why, had gotten the whole story from Mike, about how Max had used a syringe and Steve's bat to put the fear of God in her stepbrother, making sure that he stayed away from her AND her friends for good, thereafter.

But Billy had still found other ways to taunt and provoke, afterwards. With a cruel smirk or a lingering look whenever he passed Steve in the hall, one that said, *Yeah, I kicked your ass. Don't forget it.* With loud, derisive laughter that sounded from him and his entourage of jerks any time Steve walked by. With hard, ominous stares you could practically *feel* against your skin—something Nancy knew from personal experience, because she and Jonathan weren't exempt from the constant cloud of malevolent contempt radiating from Billy and his crowd (which used to be *Steve's* crowd), either. But the bulk of that ire had been directed at Steve and Steve alone.

Steve never pushed back. Never mouthed off. Never even met Billy's gaze. He ignored all of it, let it roll right over him, and Nancy could never be sure if it was because he was scared, or if he truly just didn't care any more.

But after the night of the basketball game, she sees the changes. Billy is no longer silently taunting Steve. And Steve is no longer ignoring Billy.

But if they've made peace, if that's all it is, why are they both being so *squirrely* about it? They still don't talk to each other. Now they *both* avoid eye contact. They each find reasons to move, so they're never sharing the same space unless they have to. And the strangest thing is, it's usually *Billy* that finds the reason to skulk away. It's like the two of them are trying to pretend they've each never met the other—no. More than that; it's like they're each trying to pretend the other doesn't *exist*. Except every so often—and Nancy is sure no one but her notices this—there are these brief, flitting glances they give

each other, almost always when one thinks the other isn't looking. They act like spies, each trying not to blow the other's cover. Or haha, like secret lovers, carrying on an illicit affair under everyone's nose.

*Sure. Get real, Nancy.*

One thing's for sure: whatever weirdness is taking place between them, Nancy has a gut feeling that Steve needs help. Maybe. Probably.

But she's not sure *how* to help. She's not even sure her help will be welcome.

So she waits. And she watches. For what, she isn't sure.

Then one cloudy Thursday afternoon in early February, after weeks of watching them play their odd little game of keep-away, just when the curiosity and frustration is about to drive Nancy crazy, an opportunity finally presents itself.

The after-school meeting for newspaper staff has been cancelled, and she's waiting for Jonathan to finish up with some pictures he's developing in the dark room, so he can give her a ride home. She decides to venture out into the cold to retrieve a book she'd left in Jonathan's car this morning, so she can have something to read while she waits, when lo and behold, there's Steve, standing at his own car. It looks like basketball practice must have been cancelled too.

He's bent over his open trunk, fishing around for something inside. She's never going to get another opportunity to bring this, whatever *this* is, up with him, with no one else standing around to hear, or hinder the conversation. It's now or never, Nancy.

She approaches on cat feet, not trying to startle Steve exactly, but not opposed to using the element of surprise to her advantage either. Turns out there's no need—Steve's so preoccupied that he doesn't hear her approach, not even when she's close enough to reach out and touch him.

She clears her throat politely and asks, "What's going on with you

and Billy Hargrove?”

He gives a start, straightening up so quickly he nearly smacks his head on the open trunk lid. “Huh?!”

She repeats her question. “I said: what’s going on between you and Billy Hargrove?”

“N-nothing. Why?” he says warily, eyes darting around the parking lot. Like maybe he’s looking for someone to come save him from her questions. But they’re alone. And it’s the wrong answer.

“Nothing? Really.” She crosses her arms as she says it, watching Steve’s back stiffen before he turns to face her full-on. She knows that he knows that she can still read him better than anyone.

“That’s what I said, Nancy.” He’s sticking to his story, apparently.

“Nothing. Hmmm, yeah. Do you know what I told my mom we were doing, when she caught me sneaking back into the house after you and I spent the night together for the first time?” she asks, meeting his eyes coolly.

He flinches visibly. Oh *that’s* interesting.

“That’s right,” she says. “Nothing.”

“Not,” she notes, “that I think you guys are doing the same thing we were.” Though now she’s starting to wonder... Ew. “But something is up with you two. You’re so distracted you can barely carry on a conversation anymore, and Billy Hargrove practically turns tail and runs every time you enter the room, and okay no offense? But I saw your face after everything went down last November, so I know it’s not because he’s scared of you. So try again, because I think we both know the answer isn’t ‘nothing.’”

“You’re seeing things that aren’t there, Nance. Not everything is a conspiracy.”

“Bullshit.”

She doesn’t expect him to throw his head back and laugh, a mirthless,

tired noise. He scrubs both hands down his face.

“Ohhh bullshit. Right. It’s always comes back to bullshit with you, Nancy,” he says wearily.

She opens her mouth to protest, but he doesn’t let her get the words out. “No, you’re right,” he says. “There is something going on. Between us. I just...don’t know what the hell it is.”

Nancy frowns at him. “I don’t know what that means, Steve.”

“Yeah, well, neither do I.”

She crosses her arms, gives him her most impatient look. If he thinks she’s going to give up just because he’s being cryptic, he’s wrong. She can wait him out. He knows it. She knows it. It’s just a matter of time.

Finally he gives in, “He’s been uh, living with me. At my house.”

“Billy Hargrove is *LIVING* with you?” she yelps. He *cannot* be serious.

He grabs her shoulders and shushes her, looking around wildly. “Shhhhhh! Not so loud!”

But she’s not about to let this one go. What the hell is he thinking? “What the *hell* were you thinking, Steve?!”

He moves closer, hands up in the universal sign for *go easy*. When he speaks his voice is low, but imperative. “I know, okay? Believe me, I know. It’s just...it’s complicated. In ways you don’t understand.”

“Then talking it through will probably make things *less* complicated, Steve,” she insists. “How long do you two think you can keep this a secret? Why are you even trying?”

He tilts his head pleadingly, brow furrowing. “Nance...”

“Try, Steve,” she implores. “Please.”

He runs a hand through his hair, mussing it. “Okay, okay, I’ll try. So...one night last month—it was right after I got back from taking

the kids to that Dungeons & Dragons thing in Valparaiso, you remember—I get this really weird phone call. From Max. She begged me to drive over to her street, but said I couldn't come to the house. She wouldn't tell me anything else, but," he shakes his head, "She sounded really...fucking frantic and scared. So. I went. And I find *him*. Wandering alone down the side of the road, no jacket, in the middle of the night. He was hurt pretty bad. Bruised up. Spitting blood and...and..." he trails off.

She gestures impatiently. *Go on.*

"Yeah, turns out the guy has a really...*volatile* relationship with his dad. Basically makes me and my dad look like an episode of Leave It To Beaver. And...it was snowing out, and he said he didn't have anywhere else to go, and yeah, he's a jerk, no one knows that better than me, but..."

Nancy can put the rest of the pieces together for herself: "...But you couldn't leave him there, so you took him home with you, and you patched him up, and..."

"And then we got snowed in together," he finishes, with a shrug that somehow manages to be simultaneously sheepish and defiant.

"And then you just, what? Offered to let him stay indefinitely?" she asks, incredulous.

"Sort of," he says, jamming his hands in his pockets, looking down. He doesn't seem inclined to offer any more.

"Sort of? What does that even mean?" An idea occurs to her. "Oh Steve, please tell me he's not coercing you. Is that it? Did he threaten you?"

"No! Geez, Nance!" He waves the question away with an agitated gesture. "Why would you—no, you know what? Doesn't matter. Okay, tell me this: what did you do when the power was out?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" she asks, perplexed.

"You're the one who started this, Nance. You want to understand? Humor me. Tell me how the Wheeler family whiled away the time

when you were trapped together without the benefit of technology.”

“Alright, okay...” she thinks about it for a minute. “The fireplace is in the living room, so we camped out there. Um, we played a lot of board games, I guess. I talked to Jonathan on the phone a little, and read some books. What does this have to do with—”

He cuts her off before she can finish. “Yeah, same. It was the same for us. We were stuck together in the living room, because like you said: fireplace. Eventually we got bored, but I don’t have any board games, so we played cards. And we read books from my mom’s library. Well, Billy did, at least. And we talked. Not on the phone—to each other. We talked a lot. You can find out a lot about a person when you’re stuck together, you know?”

“And so then you decided to invite him to to *live* with you?” she asks, incredulous. “Because you were stuck together a couple of days, and you managed not to kill each other then, so you thought it would be a good idea to make it a regular arrangement?”

He huffs out a humorless laugh. Shrugs one shoulder, and when he meets her eyes, he’s all defiance this time, not a hint of sheepishness to be found. “Sure, yeah. Why not?”

“I can name about a dozen reasons off the top of my head why not, Steve, starting with the way your face looked right after he was finished with you!”

“No, see, that’s where you’re wrong. You didn’t see my face *right* after he was done with me. You saw it later, way later, after I spent a week in my house, licking my fucking wounds. Recovering. Alone. Maybe you’re thinking of what my face looked like the year before? After your boyfriend was finished with me.”

A hurt gasp punches its way out of her throat. She’d forgotten—it *had* been a whole week before she’d seen him again, after their parting words to each other at the Byers’ house. She hadn’t realized that he’d been hurting like that. Hadn’t really thought about him at all, because she’d been so caught up in everything else—Murray’s exposé, the aftermath with Barb’s parents. The new thing she’d started with Jonathan. Maybe she had been a bad friend to him then. But what he



said about the stuff with him and Jonathan the year before... “I’m sorry you were alone. But what you said about Jonathan—that’s not fair, and you know it, Steve Harrington.” She’s surprised to hear her voice wobble a little.

He flinches. “Shit, you’re right. You’re right. I’m sorry, okay? It’s just—Nancy, you saw my face afterwards, but you didn’t see his, that night I picked him up on the side of the road. He was—it was bad.”

She’s tempted to say “bullshit” again, but she’s pretty sure that would be counter-productive. “I know you feel sorry for him Steve. And that’s very sweet; you’ve got a really big heart. But eventually he’s going to snap. What if he hurts you again? He’s—I shouldn’t have to tell you this. You know first-hand how he is. He’s awful!”

Steve just shakes his head. “You weren’t there, Nance. This isn’t like, some weird stark home syndrome thing.”

“Stockholm syndrome,” she corrects automatically.

“Whatever,” he says. “Point is: he’s not awful. He’s done some awful things, but...I get why now. And like, it’s not an excuse, but...his dad’s a nutcase. He didn’t just hurt Billy—he *broke* him. That’s why we’re keeping things secret—because Billy’s terrified that his dad’s going to find out he’s living with another guy, like it’s a crime or something, and I don’t know, do something worse.”

“Steve,” she says, managing to maintain a reasonable tone, despite the inherent stupidity of what he just said. Can he actually *hear* himself right now? “Don’t you think that might be even *more* of a reason to rethink this? I know you feel sorry for him, but—”

“No,” he cuts her off again. “I’m not doing this because I feel sorry for him. I mean, yeah, I *do* feel sorry for him, but that’s not it. I’m doing it because he’s...because he’s my friend.” He squints speculatively at the ground for a second. “I think.”

He meets her gaze, his eyes pleading. *Please understand.*

She sighs, wanting to. *Trying* to. “Oh, Steve...” she starts. This is so *not good*. But she can tell there’s no changing his mind. Still, she has

to ask, one last time: “Are you SURE you know what you’re doing?”

Before he can answer, a voice speaks from her right, near a big Ford Bronco that she just now realizes must have provided the perfect cover to eavesdrop behind.

“That’s enough, Harrington.”

And her spine goes cold.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

TW/CW for some mild, period-typical latent homophobia. Apologies to any Nancy stans out there. I love her, but the plot necessitated her slightly misguided actions in this chapter. Her heart's in the right place, and she's trying to help, she's just massively Missing The Point. Don't worry, it's all for the greater good, in the end.

Thank you so much for reading! I'm also LaVeraceVia on Tumblr as well, so come say hello! My ask box is always open. XD

## 9. When You Break

### Summary for the Chapter:

It's not the first time he's wanted to just give up.

But it *is* the first time, in a very long time, that someone else wouldn't let him.

*The whole story. Through Billy's eyes.*

### Notes for the Chapter:

CW/TW for dark thoughts, suicidal ideation, and some *majorly* internalized homophobia. This is a tough one guys. Please practice self-care and safe reading my friends.

This is the hardest part. It gets better after this.

When Billy is thirteen, his mom dies.

By the time Billy is fourteen, he's wished that he was in the car with her when that semi crossed into her lane almost every day since.

When Billy is fifteen and three quarters, he stands in the garage, surrounded by his father and a bunch of his Marine buddies, so simultaneously terrified and defiant he thinks his heart might beat it's way straight up out of his throat. But he passes their stupid fucking "Jarhead Test" in the end, and when it's over he's got his pride AND the pink slip to Jack Felder's navy blue Camaro to show for it. Neil takes it out of his hide for that one afterwards, but it's a small price to pay for the vital measure of freedom he's just won.

When Billy is sixteen, he meets Matty, with his kind hazel eyes and

his warm smile. And things are better for a little while.

When Billy is sixteen and a half, his dad brings Susan home. Sweet, perfect, red-headed Susan. Billy hates her immediately. He hates her daughter Maxine (fucking sweet, perfect, red-headed Maxine) even more. His dad loves them though. Or he says he does. Billy's not sure his dad loves anything. Can love anything. Then again, Billy's not sure he can love anything either. Except, maybe Matty. He thinks maybe he could love Matty.

But Neil eventually disabuses him of this notion, just like a part of Billy had always known he would.

In turn, Billy decides to disabuse him of the notion that he can have a nice, normal family with Susan and *sweet*, perfect Max.

It doesn't take long for Billy to cure Max of her sweetness. He's doing her a favor. She needs to be tough, to survive in this family.

When Billy is seventeen, his dad marries Susan and moves the whole family to Bumfuck, Indiana. And Billy meets Steve Harrington.

He's only been here a few days and he *hates* this place with a passion. All these small town bumpkins and their hick lives.

Still, the only thing worse than being stuck here is being stuck at the bottom of the dog pile. So he sets out to make a name for himself.

Billy decides to start by taking down the old keg king's record. He kills it, just like he'd known he would. Billy's always been able to push past physical discomfort when there was something he wanted on the other end. And he'd seen the glee in the eyes of that freckled kid—the one with the mean smile. What was his name again? Timmy, Tommy, something like that. He'd seen the gleam in Timmy/Tommy's eyes when Billy had come off that fucking keg.

It's Timmy/Tommy (*Tommy*, he'd eventually learn) who suggests it. "Let's tell fucking Steve Harrington there's a NEW Keg King!"

Billy had known guys like Tommy before. It wasn't the keg record he was so happy about. It was that there was a new top dog. A new person to hold his leash.

But Billy is so full of rage that he rolls with it. It's easy to do, because he hates this legendary Steve Harrington on first sight. It's like there's something ravenous and cruel living coiled inside of Billy, something that takes one glance at those stupid, rich boy sunglasses and that ridiculous hair and that dopey grin, and *hungers*. Billy clocks the way the other boy is looking at that slim pixie of a girl dancing beside him—like he's got everything he wants and nothing he doesn't. The sight of it makes Billy *burn*. Oh he's *down* for this. *More* than ready to put this preppy moron in his place.

The guy—Harrington—takes his sunglasses off when they approach, his eyes going sharp and wary. Billy doesn't even have to do any work. "We've got ourselves a new Keg King, Harrington!" Tommy crows, patting Billy on the back. He takes that as his cue to send the other boy his most intimidating grin. Harrington meets his eyes and his face slips into a bemused frown for a second, less an "oh no!" and more of a "huh?" Then his eyes flick away from Billy and over towards the punch bowl.

"Whaddya think about THAT, Stevie boy?" Tommy says, pure dumb meanness dripping from the words.

Steve's eyes flick back to Billy's face for a moment and he smiles unenthusiastically. "Yeah? Good for you, pal. Enjoy that," he says, giving Billy's chest a mocking, perfunctory pat. His long fingers slip against the bare, sweaty skin, sending a sharp cramp of angry... something (*not desire, not desire, not desire*) straight to Billy's lower belly. Then, before Billy can say another word, the other boy is moving away in pursuit of his girl—too preoccupied, too PUSSY-WHIPPED, by a little bitch with delicate, bird-like bones and tough eyes, to care that his throne's just been snatched.

It leaves Billy feeling deflated and pissed. Cock-blocked somehow. And mad as hell.

At school, Tommy talks shit about Harrington pretty much non-stop, like it's his freaking *job*. And his girlfriend Carol gossips about the guy (and his over-achieving girlfriend) so rabidly, with such frequency, that Billy wants to tell them both to shut their fucking mouths. Because already he's sick to death of hearing about stupid fucking Steve Harrington, and *he just got here*.

He can't decide which one of the couple had been more in love with Harrington before the guy (apparently) dumped them both. But he's leaning toward Tommy. You have to *care* first, to hate someone that deeply.

See, the thing is, Billy knows what he looks like, alright? Knows how he comes off. Has known ever since the high school girls started checking him out back in middle school. Chicks have always wanted him, craved him even. Guys too, but in a different way—usually. But none of it means anything. Not really. They just want to take what he has and use it. None of them really want *him*, the guy he really is. None of them ever *loved* him.

Not like they must have loved Steve *fucking* Harrington. And Harrington, that asshole, with his ridiculous hair and ridiculous smile and his ridiculous LIFE, is either too oblivious to notice, or too dumb to care. And it pisses Billy off.

So he starts pushing, trying to get a rise out of perfect Steve, trying to show him that he's his equal—no, his *BETTER*—in every way. But Billy's efforts amount to shit, for all the concern the other guy shows. He doesn't push back, doesn't rise to the challenge, doesn't give him anything more than a chagrined twist of the lips, when Billy says things to him that would make any other guy wanna swing.

It's just one more thing to add to the long list of shit in Billy's life, but this one in particular *gnaws* at him, prickles hard underneath his skin.

And to top it all off, there's Max—perfect Max, apple of Billy's father's eye—who has somehow become just another reason for Neil to hate his own son even more. She's always there, always tied to him, always his responsibility. No matter how cold or hard he is to her, now matter how rude, Susan and his father don't see. Don't CARE. They just keep pushing them together, like they can make them a family by force of will alone, when it's plain for anyone with eyes to see: Billy and his dad will never be anything resembling family to anyone, especially not each other.

So he keeps pushing Max too, hoping if he scares her, if he's awful enough, she and her mother will see them for what they are and leave. Leave them to their own misery, instead of lingering to remind

them what real families are supposed to look like.

But he never counted on once-sweet little Max being so resilient. Definitely never counted on her being so damn *defiant*.

She goes missing. Climbs out her window, runs off to fuck knows where. But he has a hunch where she's gone—with that weird little pack of nerds he sees all over town. He'd warned Max off those kids—off that *one kid*, multiple times. Made threats even. It's bad enough, being forced to play babysitter, without her being part of that little group of creeps. And anyway fuck her—why should she be happy, when happiness is so far beyond Billy's reach?

And no matter what his dad says, she's NOT his fucking sister, and he has no intention of going after her. He tells his dad so, which goes over so well it has him tasting his own blood by the time his dad's done *laying down the law*. It's humiliating, all of it playing out right there in front of Susan, and when it's over he can't stop the hot tears of rage and shame that run down his face. But she's heard it through walls before, and turned a deaf ear. At least she gets a front row seat then, gets to see the truth of what he and his father both are.

So he goes looking for Max that night after all, and tracks her down to that creepy, dilapidated little shack in the middle of the woods. Finds her, of fucking course, alone with those weirdo boys, doing the very thing he'd warned her away from, and as red-hot *pissed* as he is, a part of him delights in it, in the way it gives him an excuse to unleash the rage charring his insides.

Then Steve Harrington walks out of that house, and it's the cherry on top. Something that's been building inside him *finally* clicks into place. Something dark inside lifts its head and says "Yes."

And from there, every awful thing inside him is off the leash, and it's all red and black, all fists and endorphins, and honest to God, it's the best high he's ever felt, better than sex even, and the worst fucking thing too, brutal and scary and shaming, and a little part of him knows that he can't stop, that he WON'T, and Steve's face is there, underneath his fists, and exhilaration and fear and rage all congeal together into something beautiful and incredibly fucking ugly inside him, and he's *flying* and he's a little sick and he CANNOT FUCKING

STOP and then Max—fierce, scrappy, not-so-sweet, not-his-sister Max—puts that needle in his neck, and it's over. And he's not sure but he thinks he might be a little relieved. And then she's putting that nightmare fucking bat, the one with the nails in it—and Jesus, who the fuck would make a thing like that?—putting that bat between his legs and he's about to piss himself and he's pretty sure he's been gelded and that's the last thing he remembers.

Then he's waking up in the early hours of the next morning, alone in the Byers household, and his balls are somehow, thankfully, *blessedly* still intact. The first thing he does is roll over and puke his guts out, right there onto the carpeted living room floor, and the next thing he does is sob until there's nothing left inside of him.

He ends up walking back home, and it takes hours, or it *would* have, if Max hadn't pulled up beside him on the road, not long after the sun has broken the horizon, driving his car, *driving his fucking CAR*, and said, oh so calmly, "You don't tell him what happened, and I won't either, asshole. Get in."

He snorts, scrubs at his nose with the back of his forearm, and growls, "You think Neil will be mad that I beat the shit out of some pervy high schooler I found alone with you in a shack the middle of the fucking woods? Shit, he'll probably pat me on the back. Now get out of my car and give me the keys, *Maxine*."

But she doesn't flinch. She just slides the car into park, rests her elbow on the window ledge and brings blue eyes full of cold fury up to meet his. "No, but I think he'll be mad that you swore at me, threatened to hurt me, and then gave me this." She pulls up her sleeve to show off the dark bruise that wraps all the way around her arm just above the wrist.

He sputters, "I didn't do that to you! That's a lie!"

"Is it?" she asks calmly. "Which one of us do you think Neil will believe?"

Billy just starts at her, mouth agape, unable to muster up the words.

"Steve Harrington's going to be fine, by the way. And you should be



glad, since you'd be in a jail cell right now if he wasn't. You *jerk*. So here's what's going to happen: when we get home, you're going to say you drove around all night looking for me, until you finally tracked me down at my friend Jane's house first thing this morning. I'll apologize for worrying everyone, you'll keep your mouth shut, and we'll both be fine. Got me? Good. And oh yeah, one more thing: you're going to leave my friends alone from now on. And that includes Steve." She opens the door and gets out, then walks around to the other side, sits down in the passenger seat, and refuses to say another word all the way home.

She's right. Neil *would* believe anything she told him. He wouldn't even be that off the mark. Look at what Billy almost accomplished last night. *Christ*.

She is wrong about one thing though. *We'll both be fine*, she'd said. It's full-on light outside by the time he gets them back home. Neil and Susan are waiting up for them in the living room. Susan rushes to her daughter when she comes in the door, her eyes full of concern. Neil doesn't move from his chair, simply turning his gaze to Billy. The emotion in his eyes is not concern.

After that day, it's like the floodgates have opened. Like his dad can't get through the day without insulting Billy, without calling him a faggot or a piece of shit, without letting Billy see the hate behind his eyes. And the cherry on top, the days his dad REALLY enjoys, are the ones where he brings his fists into play. It was like this before Susan, sometimes, but his dad had tamped it down for a while, played nice for his new wife, spent more time ignoring Billy, throwing out mostly verbal digs and fewer punches. Billy wishes he could say that had been nice while it lasted, but that would be a lie. Waiting for the other shoe to drop had sucked just as bad. Worse, maybe.

At least now it's back to business as fucking usual.

Business as usual is what lands Billy on the side of the road that cold January night, without a jacket, when Steve Harrington happens upon him, and everything changes.

It's not the first time he's wanted to just give up.

But it is the first time, in a very long time, that someone else wouldn't let him.

It's also the first time Steve Harrington reminds him of Matthew Barton. It won't be the last.

He doesn't even remember what Harrington says to get him in that car. But he thinks it's probably the worst place he could find himself, and ending up here, like this, is some awful kind of poetic justice. The Universe has a sick sense of humor, no surprise there.

Billy thinks he knows humiliation. Thinks he's intimately acquainted with the feeling. But he learns, over the next twenty-four hours, how little he really knew of shame until now.

He loses control. He screams, he shouts, he *fights*. He gets held down, then...then just *held*. That's *before* he pisses blood and then makes an even bigger fool of himself. Then, he whines. He panics. He nearly passes out. He shakes. He whimpers like a little bitch. He pleads. He shows Steve Harrington his fucking dick before it's all over. "Embarrassed" doesn't even *begin* to cover the depth of humiliation he feels.

But...it isn't all bad. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like, to be touched with such kindness. It makes something curl up and quake inside his belly, and he doesn't know whether to curse or cry at the feeling. He ends up doing a little bit of both, insinuates cruel things about Steve's sexuality, snarls and screams and threatens. Cries a little too, but does enough of the former to hide the latter, he hopes.

It doesn't work. Harrington doesn't go away, doesn't take his gentle touches and his perceptive stare and run like he should. He's...not at all what Billy thought. He keeps expecting judgement from the guy. Or condescension. Or smug satisfaction. Instead, he gets sincerity, and an offer of friendship.

Harrington is an idiot, turns out, but he's one of the genuinely *good* variety—kind, and naive, and *stupidly* tender-hearted. In the same way Matty used to be...

Just thinking Matty's name sends a hot spike of pain through his

insides, lancing open parts of him he'd long thought dead. He can't deny the similarities between Matty and Harrington. But Billy's not the same person he was, when he was friends with Matty. And he's not interested in being friends with Harrington.

He's not interested in having anything he can't carry with him, when he gets the hell out of this hick town one day.

Still, he can't help but be fascinated by the other boy. There's a mystery there, buried under all that guileless goodness, and it's just begging to be solved. It's an honest mistake—Billy's groggy, half-awake and still coming down off the Percocets, and he hears a sound like millions of tiny feet scrabbling on the roof. It's not his fault he's never heard the sounds of an ice storm before. Stupid fucking Indiana weather. And maybe the phrase "There's something on the roof!" would have scared anyone who'd just been awoken from a dead sleep, but it wouldn't have sent them into a panicked tailspin the way it does Harrington. Then things get weirder when, a few minutes later, the other boy takes a trip upstairs to get blankets, and comes back drugged to the gills.

None of this is normal behavior.

Harrington is a puzzle, one Billy is so tempted to try and solve. But he can't afford the time or effort that would take, even if he kind of wishes he could.

But the Universe, in its infinite cruelty, has other plans, because it decides to give him all the time in the world.

The power is still out when Billy wakes the next morning, and he realizes the reality of his situation then: he's well and truly snowed in with Steve Harrington—no power, no distractions, and no escape, for the foreseeable future. The two of them are stuck together, with nothing but each other to pass the time.

It's all the more reason Billy shouldn't keep poking at the guy, prodding at vulnerabilities and making cracks about his sexuality whenever the opportunity presents itself. Especially since Harrington might take the chance to throw all of those burrs right back in Billy's face at any minute. But he doesn't stop. He can't. He'll do anything

he has to, to rattle the other boy—if he keeps him on his toes, maybe he'll keep him from noticing how weak Billy really is.

Harrington calls him on it. Tells him to cut the crap and insists they really are friends now. And despite his trepidation, there's a part of Billy that warms to the idea. That's probably what scares him the most. He can't afford to feel the way being around Harrington makes him want to feel.

It's why he intends to hold Steve at arm's length. To interact as little as possible, and just ride this out until he can get back home and face the music with Neil. Make whatever amends he has to, however he has to, until he has his keys to his blue lady in his hands again, and his escape plan from this shitty town firmly back in its place.

But he didn't expect to be so bored. And he really didn't expect Steve Harrington to be so fucking easy to talk to.

Billy's the one who suggests playing cards. He's also the one who suggests they play for secrets. He can't resist showing off a little when Steve hands him the deck to shuffle. He's halfway through before he realizes that, on instinct, he's gone straight into Matty's patented Magic Shuffle. Something squeezes inside his chest for a moment, threatening to crack his ribs open, but then Harrington smiles at him with such unfettered *delight* that suddenly he can breathe again. Then the fucker ruins it by asking who taught Billy how to shuffle like that and Billy has to slam iron shutters down inside himself to keep the memories from tearing him apart.

He gets through it. Starts to enjoy it, even. Teaching Harrington to play Egyptian Rat Screw is fun. Making him say the name is even more fun. And then winning repeatedly and getting to shake Harrington down for his secrets? That brings actual joy to Billy's soul. There's a part of him that's been *dying* to find out what makes Harrington tick, and now he gets to do so without restriction.

The guy is a closed book when it comes to his ex, but surprisingly open when it comes to other questions, especially the ones about sex (Billy's personal favorite). It's exhilarating, asking his questions and watching Harrington grow ever more pink while he drops answers that are, by turns, witty and painfully sincere. The whole scene is so

arresting that, for a little while, Billy almost forgets where he is.

Then Harrington breaks out the wine, and shit gets *really* interesting.

He deflects Harrington's pointed question about Max's little boyfriend, gets the game back on topic. And what a fucking topic it is, because that's when Harrington confesses that he once fucked Carol.

On its own, it's not *that* scandalous. Tommy's a fan of drinking until he passes out on the nearest available surface, and Carol's a fan of latching on to the nearest available guy and refusing to let go. Billy himself has had to fend off her advances a time or twelve. But then Steve lets slip the real revelation: he hadn't fucked Carol while Tommy was passed out—he'd fucked her while Tommy *watched*, right here in this very living room. The thought of it makes Billy feel...a little hot and bothered. Like maybe he wouldn't mind taking a page out of Tommy's book himself.

He blames the heat he's feeling (and the alcohol, can't forget the alcohol) for what happens next. Everything's going great at first: Billy keeps winning, and he keeps asking dirtier and dirtier questions, and Steve keeps *letting him*, giving as good as he gets.

Really, Billy walks right into it when he asks Harrington, "Who's the best lay at Hawkins High?" and Harrington pretends to think about it for a moment before answering, "Me, obviously," giving Billy the most mischievous fucking grin he's ever seen in his life. Billy gives him hell for it. It's the only thing he can do to keep himself from responding, *Yeah, I just bet you are, pretty boy*. Oh no.

It gets worse when Harrington starts describing his favorite sexual position: "I like it when...when she sits on me." and when asked to elaborate says, "Like...when I'm on a chair or sitting up in bed, and she's in my lap. And you know, you're all...body-to-body, can't get any closer, and her breasts are so soft where they're pressed against your chest, and her body's so hot against yours, and she's ALL the way down, and you can't get any deeper, and she can just kind of... *work* her hips around on you. Or you can lift her up off your cock and bring her back down so it feels even deeper, and you can feel every sound she makes through your skin, and it's so *fucking* good? I mean,

I'll take it any way I can get it, but...that's the way I like it best."

Billy can see it. Harrington, drugged with pleasure, pupils blown wide, lips gone puffy from kissing, long-fingered hands flexing on some dumb broad's hips, while he moves *up, up, up* into her, lifting her up and bringing her back down on him, moaning, his hips flexing, his skin slick with sweat. Billy can *see* it, and he can feel it too, way down low, and oh *fuck*. That's when he starts to worry. He can't fucking be feeling like this. But he's shit outta luck, because the chilly temperature of the room is the closest thing he's gonna get to a cold shower any time soon.

That's when it starts. When the heat he's feeling starts the inevitable slow, upward rev, as it so often does, into that other emotion that he's so much more comfortable with.

Then Harrington wins the next round, and of course, of *fucking* course, he decides to ask, not about anything that makes sense, but about Lucas Sinclair.

Billy thinks sometimes about the look on the scrawny kid's face when Billy had slammed him against the wall, and feels a little sick. Look, he knows he's a bastard, alright? He's aware. Truth is, he accepted the fact that he's a stone cold piece of shit a long time ago. But he's NOT a stone cold piece of *racist* shit, not like Neil. And the skeptical, disgusted look that Steve gives him when he asks the question lets him know that Steve thinks he is. It's a punch to the gut. He deserves it, probably. Why *wouldn't* Harrington think that? But it's still a punch to the gut. He tries to explain, needs Harrington to know that, of all the things he is, he's not *that*. But he's fucking it all up, making a mess of it, and even once Harrington gets it, he still doesn't *get it*. Because he scolds Billy. Admonishes him.

"...it's *fucked up* that you terrified a kid because...just because..."

"Because I'm mad that Maxine gets to be happy, and I don't? Yeah, that's me. I'm a fucked up kind of guy, Harrington!" It's all he can do not to bare his teeth.

Because Billy knows what a fuck-up he is. He doesn't need it spelled out for him, *trust him*. He doesn't need Harrington to look at him like

that, with such earnest disappointment, like he didn't know what Billy was, all along.

*Matty*, he thinks. *Matthew*. If he could just tell Steve, if he could just say what happened, then maybe Steve would understand. Why he feels the way he does about Max and Lucas. Why he is the way he is. But he can't. Can't bring himself to say his name aloud. He hasn't since that awful day in Oceanside.

So he does what he always does: he turns it outward. Goes full bore on Harrington. Questions his motives. Insinuates the worst. Loses his mind a little.

But for all his niceness, Harrington's got steel in his spine, and he doesn't let Billy run him down. Harrington offers him answers, but only if Billy *earns them* on the terms Billy has already set. Billy doesn't turn him down. Can't, not with the rage that's working its way to a steady crackle right below the surface of his skin. It should be easy: win another round and ask Harrington whatever he wants, with a guarantee of an honest answer in return. He's already won almost all of the hands they've played tonight. Which of course means he can't fucking win a round now to save his life.

It's the frustration and the anger. That's what he blames his shitty, cruel answers on. He's ashamed, later, when he thinks back to what he said. *Doggy style. That way I don't have to look at the bitch's face.* It's not true, not exactly. It is true that he doesn't connect with chicks when they're together in the sack. Doesn't like to look them in the eyes and feel the emptiness between them where something real is supposed to be. But he's not cruel to them, not like that. He's never made a chick turn around so he doesn't have to look at her. But he lets Harrington think he has. Because he thinks, for some inexplicable reason, that it will hurt him to hear it.

Finally, he wins a hand. Gets to ask his question. "Why are you doing this?" *Why are you pretending to care?* That's what he means.

And Harrington responds, "Because I want to believe in second chances. Because I *need* to." And when pressed, says, "It's because I hurt people." He elaborates on it, eventually. Because Billy forces him to.

He tells him about the girl who died last year. Was killed. *How?* Billy wonders. *What happened?* But he doesn't press any more. Because he can see how badly Harrington's already hurting. Because he believes he's responsible. And Billy can't hurt him any more than he already has. Suddenly doesn't want to.

Steve calls an end to it after that, and Billy doesn't argue. They bed down for the night, Billy on the couch, and Steve on the air mattress. But as he lays there, shivering, unable to stop the wheels in his head from turning, he realizes he can't just leave it like that. He can't let Harrington feel so alone, not after everything he just said. But he doesn't have the words, so in lieu of anything else to do, knowing it's a bad idea, he slips off the couch, lifts Harrington's covers, and crawls, shaking, into bed with him. It's a bad idea, but he doesn't have a better one. He tells Harrington it's because he's freezing, and that's not a lie either. But for a moment, he wishes he had the stones to tell him what he really means: *I understand.*

But he can't touch him, physically or emotionally, so this will have to do.

Until it doesn't. Harrington wakes up gasping, choking like a drowning man, caught in the grip of some terrible waking nightmare. Billy doesn't even think about it then, just reaches out, starts stroking his hand firmly between Harrington's shoulder blades, murmuring what he hopes is a soothing combination of nonsense and practical reassurance, until Steve can breathe again.

"What the hell happened to you, Harrington?" He doesn't mean any harm, it just scares him to witness...whatever that was. But Steve's silence scares him even more.

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He feels lighter the next morning. He shouldn't. There is absolutely no reason to feel this way. Not after the last two days. Not after what he witnessed from Harrington last night. *Especially* not after waking up to feel the warm, shameful press of the other boy's body against his back and ass. But despite all of that, he can't help but feel... almost good. *Not* good, not exactly, but, for this single moment at least, like everything's going to be okay.

He can't stop himself from waking Steve up too. He wants...he'd wanted...to share this moment with another person.

Harrington, however, clearly feels nothing of the sort. It's okay though. Billy gets it. He's not going to coddle him through it. Wouldn't help. But there are other ways to pull him out of his funk...

So he pokes. Keeps poking, trying to get a rise out of the other boy. "You know, some of us were never given the luxury of sleeping in for as long as we want."

"And SOME of us don't make assumptions about other people's lives that we know nothing about," Steve shoots back, then seems to think about it before he tacks on, "Asshole," for good measure.

*There* it is. Finally! This is the Harrington he likes best—full of fire, balls of fucking *steel*. It's a whole hell of a better look on him than spineless and sulking.

It's still a back and forth between them though. Harrington's still smarting from the shock of revealing so much last night. And like Billy said: he gets it. It sucks when fate guts you in front of the last person you ever wanted to show your insides to. Steve Harrington has spent the last 48+ hours doing Billy one solid after another, the least Billy can do is return the favor. But a part of him still wishes Steve trusted him off the cuff, without having to be told he can. It's stupid, he knows. But he longs to say, *you told me you were my friend, why can't you believe that I'm yours?*

But even Billy doesn't believe that. He can't, because he's still not sure it's true. Steve's genuine, and kind, so fucking *likable*, despite Billy's best efforts to do otherwise, but he knows that when this storm lets up, and life returns to normal, that genuine and kind and likable

will have no place in Billy's life. Billy knows it. And Steve knows it too.

...Doesn't he?

The question plagues Billy the rest of the day, as the two of them try to figure out how to co-exist in this weird little snowed-in world. There's not a lot of smooth sailing. Harrington sticks his foot in his mouth practically every other time he opens it. But it's always an accident. Billy's got a lot of weak spots, and Harrington just happens to be aces at inadvertently stumbling over them. There's no malice in him, even Billy can see that.

He's just so goddamn *good-hearted*. Billy has a hard time comprehending it. People aren't like that, not in his experience. He ignores the awful voice in the back of his head that reminds him: *Matty was. Is. Maybe.*

Fuck.

Maybe that's why he does it, even though he knows better. He *knows better* than to read Steve Harrington's palms. His...his mom had told him, way back when he was a little boy, to never, ever use the skill, unless he truly wanted to know who someone was. He doesn't need to know any more about Harrington. It's already a struggle to preserve that distance between himself and the other boy, even though he's going to need it when this is all over. But he goes through with it anyway. Because he's bored. And high. And because, God help him, he wants to know.

This is what he learns: Steve Harrington houses untold depths. He may seem like a yuppie poster boy, but he is *so much more*. He's funny, and generous, and stupidly genuine. Too genuine for his own good. He thinks he's dumb, and no one's ever bothered to tell him otherwise. And he's not exactly book smart, but he's a hell of a lot more perceptive than most people. He's hung up on his ex, Little Miss Perfect, to an almost tragic degree. Because anyone can see that that girl doesn't give a damn about Steve. If Harrington's lucky, his fixation will fade. If not, he's fucked. Because with a Heart Line like that, whoever he truly falls for, she'll be the only one.

Between his Life Line and his Head Line, it becomes very clear that Steve Harrington has a Purpose. Billy's mom would have said that Steve was meant for greater things. But Billy knew that already, he supposes. He's known it from the moment they met. It's why he'd hated him so badly, at first. Because Steve Harrington fucking *shines*, and he has no idea. Steve believes he's the same thing that everyone else around here thinks he is: the boy who used to be King. The boy who isn't much of anything, anymore.

But Harrington isn't trapped here. Not if he doesn't want to be. Because he has the luckiest fucking fortune Billy's ever seen.

And all of it—his fortune, his hand resting in Billy's, his eyes on Billy's face—it makes Billy *want*. And he can't. Not like that.

He tries not to. *Don't*, he tells himself. Don't watch the shape of his mouth when he exhales the smoke like that. Don't cradle the back of his hand like that. Don't stroke the soft skin inside his wrist *like that*. Don't keep...*fondling* his fucking hands, Billy. Don't read him Shakespeare. Don't read him *those sonnets*. Don't say it— "...maybe there was just one guy he couldn't get out of his head, even if he wanted to." Don't get in bed with him again. Don't cuddle back against him like that. Don't call him "amigo." *Please* don't believe him when he tells you that you're really friends. Don't tangle your fingers in his thick, soft hair. Billy, you stupid son-of-a-bitch, whatever you do, *don't* brush your mouth against his as he falls asleep. Don't tell yourself it's okay because it's only the one time.

But he *does*. All of it. Every single time. It feels too good, too *right*, not to. He *has to*. Because he sees Harrington. And he thinks maybe, just maybe, Harrington might see him too. He goes to sleep believing it. Choosing to believe it. That they really could be friends. Because there's something he didn't tell Harrington, when he was reading his palm.

At the base of Billy's own ring finger, there are two parallel lines, like a ring. *They call it the Traveller's Band*, he'd said. Steve has one...and Billy has one too. *It means you're a wanderer. A nomad. More at home on the road than in any one place*, he'd said. He knows the truth of those words on a fundamental level, way down in his bones. Knows the hunger to leave, and just keep leaving, seeking that never-ending

horizon as long as you can. Harrington—*Steve*—knows that want too, Billy's sure of it. Can see the hunger in his eyes, the caged tiger inside, pacing behind steel bars, longing to be free. And as Billy falls asleep, for just a moment, he lets himself think: *maybe we could...*

He's out before he finishes the thought, but that sweet, tenuous curl of hope remains.

In the distant future, when Billy thinks back on those strange, wondrous days, snowed in with Steve Harrington, it's not the pain he'll remember first. It's that hope.

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The next morning, it all goes to hell.

He's fucked. *They're* fucked. Once Steve's little pipsqueak busts in on them and discovers what's going on, there's no going back. There's no fixing this. Game over.

Billy was an idiot for ever thinking this could work. Word's going to get out. It's happened before. And when Neil finds out, he's going to kill them both.

Harrington says he's not scared of him, but he doesn't understand. Harrington's not scared because he's never *had* to be scared, not like Billy has. Billy *knows* what Neil's capable of. And even though this isn't Oceanside and Neil doesn't have Felder and Patterson here to back him up, or Bronson here to pull some strings to keep the cops off his back, it won't stop him from getting the jump on Harrington by himself if he really wants to. Billy was alone when he did it back in November, and what he did is NOTHING compared to what his old man will do.

Nausea roils *hard* through Billy's insides. He thinks he's going to be sick.

Harrington keeps arguing that he should stay. That it's going to be

alright. When arguing doesn't work, he pleads. Cajoles. But Billy tunes it all out. He's made up his mind. The only way to keep this from getting worse is to cut it off now.

"Take me home, Harrington."

It's unfair. His whole life is so goddamn, brutally unfair. It's all he can think on the car ride back. The thought keeps crashing over him in waves that swell and ebb with ever-increasing frequency, until he feels like he's going to explode, and all of a sudden he's smashing his knuckles against the front of Harrington's glove compartment and straining to hold in the angry scream trying to claw its way out of his throat.

"Billy, *listen*. You don't have to do—" Steve starts.

Jesus fucking Christ, *all* he wants is to say *yes, turn the car around, take me home with you*. Can't Harrington *see* that? But he *can't*, not matter how badly he wants to. So instead he says, "If you invite me to come back to your place one more time, Harrington, I swear to fucking god I will put your head through the steering wheel. Drive."

He shakes his head, running a hand roughly through his hair, trying to hold tight to the fraying threads of his sanity.

Harrington's too damn good for his own good. It's why Billy says what comes next. Because if he doesn't, Steve might never give up trying to fix him. But Billy can't be fixed. His fucked up life cannot be fixed. And Neil most definitely cannot know about what happened this week, about where he was, who he was with. He can never see them together. So now, the only way to save Steve is to make sure he knows that he can't save Billy. And the only way to save himself is to keep Steve from trying to save him. He makes him let him out a few roads over from Old Cherry. Then he does his best to save them both.

"If I find out you told anyone about this, I'll make what I did to you last year look like it was *nothing*. Same goes for your bratty little shadow too. You got me?"

He doesn't wait for an answer. Just thumps the roof of the car for

emphasis and walks away, wrapping his borrowed jacket tighter around him against the chill and trying not to think of what Steve's face must look like as he pulls away, tires whining through the slush. Billy's got worse things up ahead to think about now.

There's not much to say about what happens after that. Billy's locked out, so he has to knock to be let back into his own house. There's running footsteps, and then Max is opening the door, wide-eyed. Billy barely sees her. He looks beyond to see his old man waiting there, that same cold distaste tightening his mouth, darkening his eyes. Nothing new under the sun.

Except. Maybe there is. Because when he lays his head down to sleep that night, having been relieved of his dignity, his integrity, and the sum total of his life's savings, there's something new and bright inside him, where once only an empty space would have remained.

*Maybe...*

He doesn't sleep much that night, but that's alright. Because sometime in the middle of the night, *maybe* becomes *please*.

He gets up early that morning. Even earlier than usual. An idea has been brewing. He scrawls out a hasty note on a piece of scrap paper:

*Jude,*

*You're not a big fan of reading. I get it. But try this one. You'll dig it. It's better than Shakespeare.*

-B

...and tucks it inside the cover of his favorite book, the one he must have read nearly a dozen times by now. All of this he wraps up in the

jacket Steve had sent with him yesterday, and tucks the bundle deep down into his backpack.

Classes start thirty minutes earlier at the middle school than they do at Hawkins High, so after dropping Max off he always gets to school earlier than anyone else. He usually takes that time to chill out in his car, get in a smoke or two. But today he slips quietly into the hallway where the senior lockers are, and quickly, before anyone notices, pops the lock on Steve's locker (it's not hard, the shitty hardware in this school hasn't been upgraded since the 50's) and slips the bundle inside.

Maybe. Please.

He hears the whispers, sees people talking to each other behind their hands as he passes. *It's fine*, he tells himself. They're talking about his face, and the bruises there. That's all. Right? It's gotta be.

He makes up a bullshit story about a bar fight, and they all buy it.

Maybe. Please.

He looks, but he doesn't see Steve all day, and by the time fourth period English arrives, Billy's anxiety is high. The other kids buzz around him, hungry for gossip, wanting the scoop about who he beat up this time, but he barely acknowledges them, looking for the one person who isn't swarming around him like a greedy little gnat. But though Steve is there, he barely even looks up from his textbook the whole class. And when he does, he never makes eye contact with Billy. Never even glances in his direction.

Not good. But...he'll see Steve at basketball practice, and he'll tell him then. He'll find the words, whatever they are, to get them back to that place they were before. When the fire had crackled at their feet and Billy had said *You break it, you bought it*, and Steve had said, *Ditto*.

He just needs to see him. He can make it right.

He gives no shits about the actual practice. Neither does Steve, apparently, because they both suck. Coach isn't happy about it, but

Coach can fuck right off, as far as Billy is concerned.

Steve hangs back after practice, ostensibly to work on free throws, but obviously trying to avoid something. Someone. Billy. That's not going to work though. Billy hangs back, keeping to the shadows. He's gotten good at that over the years. And he's got his own reasons, to the tune of the ugly bruises covering his torso, for not wanting anyone else to see him in the shower.

When Steve finally hits the showers, after everyone else has completely cleared out, Billy follows. He waits until Steve's at the shower column, dunking his head under the spray, before he approaches, stepping under the faucet right beside Steve's.

He stands there, under the spray, feeling more naked than he ever has in his life, trying work up the nerve to say the words. *Thank you. For letting me stay. For being kind. For being good to someone like me. You said we were friends. I get it now. I want to be.* Say something Billy. Say ANYTHING.

He knows the moment the other boy realizes he's there, even though he doesn't turn to look Billy's way, because his shoulders go rigid, and he sucks in a surprised little breath. Then he turns. Not towards Billy, but away, in a clear dismissal. He doesn't even give him a chance. No words, not even a look, just the flattest of brush offs, like Billy isn't even there.

"Well good afternoon to you too, St. Jude," Billy says, feeling the heat begin to rise in his cheeks, in his chest. Still nothing. A few more seconds pass, then Steve turns and walks away. Just like that. Doesn't even bother turning the faucet off.

Panic and anger start to co-mingle hotly in Billy's veins. He follows him. "Hey! HEY jackass, I'm talking to you!" Still no response, so he reaches out for the skin of Steve's bare shoulder.

He only means to get his attention, but Steve rounds on him like he's been hit, eyes blazing. "WHAT. The fuck. Do *you* want?" he spits. And that's when Billy sees it. Blood. Four or five parallel bloody stripes running horizontally across the skin of Steve's right hip. Each spanning about three inches in length, evenly spaced, tucked just



below the iliac crest, too even to be anything but deliberate. Intentional.

Billy feels his eyes go wide at the sight and Steve slaps a hand over the cuts, hiding them from sight.

“What the hell happened to you, Harrington?” Billy says, feeling his panic ratchet up another notch.

Then Steve’s doing something with his face that Billy’s never seen him do before—he’s letting it go mean. He snakes his hand out and pokes Billy squarely in his ribs. His bruised ribs. “Looks like we’ve both got something to hide, huh?” And the words are mocking, snide.

It hits Billy like a straight shot to the ‘nads. Hurts like one too. He feels a punched breath *whuff* out of him, as if he’s actually been hit.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Harrington?” he rasps, hurting.

Harrington sneers, “Not a goddamn thing you should be worried about,” and turns to walk away.

Without thinking, he’s moving, shoving the other boy *hard*. But he doesn’t have time to be horrified at what he’s just done, at the thing he’d sworn to himself that he’d never do again, because Harrington is whirling on him, like *he’s* the one that started this, and snarling, “What the hell is your PROBLEM?”

“That’d be *you*,” Billy tells him.

Steve’s smile is unkind. “We both know you’ve got so many, there’s no way I’m even *near* the top of the list.”

Shock fills Billy’s body. Who *is* this person standing in front of him right now? He feels his throat working, and for one horrified moment, thinks he might be about to cry. But then *anger* flares bright and hot, overriding that other feeling, the old familiar emotion rushing in to drown out the hurt. He *slams* Steve back against the lockers, using the weight of his own naked body to hold him there.

“Violence?” Harrington starts, mock offended. “From you, Hargrove?”

What a shock—”

But Billy doesn't let him finish, slamming him once more against the lockers, even harder this time.

“Coward,” Steve spits. “*Pussy.*” *I hate you*, his expression says.

*Please. No.*

Billy grabs his face in one hand. Wanting him to take it back, take it away. “Shut your big fucking MOUTH, Harrington!”

“DO IT,” Steve responds. And a part of Billy wants to, *oh God*, he wants to. Fix it with his fists. Let the rage and heat take him, carry him away, and fill in the blank spaces left behind. *Do it.*

But there's something grim and hopeless in Steve's eyes. Not satisfaction or smugness. Something else that Billy knows the feeling of too well.

Pain.

Billy freezes, fist pulled back beside his head. Time slows, stretching out into one long, protracted breath...

Then Harrington looks down between their two bodies. And Billy realizes. *Oh God.* He's getting hard. Against Steve's hip, his naked cock snugged right up into the hollow there, the two of them separated only by the towel tucked loosely around Harrington's hips.

Steve looks back up, and their eyes meet. Billy realizes he's still gripping the other boy's face in his hand. He softens the fist he's making with his left hand, moves it instead to brace himself against the locker beside Steve's head, his body shaking.

He wants...oh God...he wants to grab him, press in against his body without this fucking towel between them, he wants to wrestle and roll and...and...he wants to bear Steve down to the dirty floor and just...fucking eat him alive. In all senses of the phrase.

This is why Neil hates him. Calls him a freak. And another, uglier word that begins with *F*. But if Billy's a freak, then let him be a

fucking freak. He'll goddamn revel in it. FUCK Neil, fuck the rest of the world. If he can just have...

"What the *hell* are you ladies still doing here?!" *Coach.*

And the moment shrivels into nothingness. Billy turns his back to both of them, grabbing a towel off the bench to tuck around his hips and gasping for air, his lungs feeling like two popped balloons. He can hear Steve exchanging words with Coach behind him, making excuses probably, but he can barely make out the words over the dull roar in his ears.

Coach leaves, and Billy turns to look at Harrington once more. The other boy is looking back at him, his expression unreadable. Red blood blooms through the towel at his hip, leaving an ugly flower of a stain. Billy feels sick, looking at it.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you, Harrington?" Billy twirls a finger at his temple, feeling like they've both gone mad.

"A lot," Steve says blankly. "How about you?"

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*Did I do that to him?* Billy wonders afterwards. *Did I make him act like that?* He thinks perhaps he did. He thinks he breaks everything.

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Billy skips school the next day. He can't stand the thought of being there. Of looking at Steve Harrington and seeing hate in his eyes. Or worse, disgust. But the bottom doesn't fall out until that weekend.

He's distracted. He knows better than to be distracted, than to be

anything but vigilant, when he's around Neil. But he just doesn't care.

He doesn't care about the shitty Sunday dinner Susan cooks for everyone. Doesn't care about the pointed noises of irritation Neil is making from the head of the table. Doesn't care about the worried glances Max keeps shooting back and forth between the two of them. Doesn't care when Neil demands that he "Show some gratitude to Susan for this beautiful meal she's cooked," (*you little fucker* goes unsaid, but Billy hears that part too). Doesn't care when he sucks on his teeth and replies, in his most saccharine, patronizing tone, "GEE, *thanks Susan.*"

*BOOM.* His head's rocking back before the pain registers. He hears Max's little shriek, sees the *plop, plop, plop*, of his own blood dripping onto the white tablecloth. Neil is looming over him, eyes gone dark and dangerous, mouth just beginning to quirk up at the corners. He hears Susan's voice pleading behind him. And over all that, the pounding of his blood in his ears. He remembers Steve saying, so matter-of-factly, like it's the easiest thing in the world, "Your dad shouldn't hit you."

And something breaks inside Billy's brain, and it's coming up, all the fire and rot that lives inside him, and Billy....Billy just fucking lets it.

Later, he'll only remember about half the things he said, but it's enough to make him cringe. *If you ever put your hands on me again, I'll kill you. I will kill you, and I will burn this fucking house down around you, even if your perfect fucking wife and your precious new daughter are still inside.*

Everything that happens afterwards is a blur. It doesn't hit him until he's in his car, driving away. He hears his own words in his head, and the things Neil had said to him after: *I knew there was something wrong with you, the minute we brought you home from the hospital. Your mother said you were perfect, but I knew.* He has to pull the car over and open the door so he can puke. Billy knows he's a piece of shit, but he never thought he was a monster. He didn't mean the things he said. He didn't. But he knows Neil did.

He wipes the puke off his mouth and rests his forehead against the

steering wheel. He considers driving his car up a tree. Or off the edge of the cliff at the quarry. Straight into the water. Boom. Done.

But he doesn't do that. He refuses to give Neil the satisfaction. Instead, he pulls into the back of the lot at the truck stop out on 99. He can sleep in his car tonight. He's just got to make it through the night. Tomorrow is Monday, and the garage is open. Maybe Gordo will let him sleep on the couch in the office after hours. Maybe. And he can shower every day at school, after practice. He can do this. He'll be alright. He always is.

But as the sun sets, and darkness creeps in, he realizes he's not going to be alright. It's cold, and getting colder with every moment that passes. The tank's half empty, and he can't afford to run the car all night—he has zero cash, and payday isn't until Thursday. He's wearing his leather jacket, but he's so cold he might as well be in nothing but his underwear. He's starting to lose feeling in his fingers and toes. There's no way he can make it through the night like this.

He doesn't think about it, when he puts the car in gear. Doesn't think about where he's going, or what he's going to do. He just drives.

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He can't believe what he's done, when he wakes the next morning. The fight with Neil. The leaving. Where he went after. Where he is now. He's frustrated, and embarrassed, and more than a little terrified.

But underneath all of that, there's relief. He has no money, no home, *no family*...but for now, he's safe. And Steve had said he could *stay*.

But that means he has to keep Steve safe too. No one can ever know he's staying here. No matter what.

It's more than a little awkward, in the days that follow. He avoids Harrington at school. Avoids him as much as he can at the house too. It's not hard—between work and school and practice, Billy has time

for little else.

He knows he should quit the team—it's ten more hours a week that he could be working, making the cash that he desperately needs to survive. But he can't. It's the last place he can pretend that he's just a normal teenager, and he's...he's not ready to let that go yet.

But he's going to have to, soon. He needs all the work hours he can get. He needs money for gas, and food, and the insurance payment for his car that will be due soon. Plus he needs to pay Harrington some kind of rent. And he hasn't saved one fucking cent that will help him get out of this awful fucking town one day.

A few weeks later, things are going...awful. They're going awful, but it's still better than what Billy expected. He's got a safe place to lay his head, and it's with a good-hearted dope who buys weed and gets them both high just to break the news that he refuses to take Billy's money for rent (even if he *does* use that stupid Walt Whitman book to get his attention). It's kindness on a level Billy has never experienced, and they could have been friends, *real* friends, if Billy hadn't fucked it up when he did. But they're...friendly, at least, and that's not nothing. It's more than Billy deserves.

Until Harrington has to go and open his fat mouth to Little Miss Honor Roll. Billy sees Steve talking to his ex across the school parking lot, gesticulating wildly. And somehow, like he always seems to do with Steve, Billy just KNOWS.

He creeps closer, stops behind the large shape of a Ford Bronco to listen.

He doesn't hear the whole thing, but he hears enough.

What the fuck is Harrington thinking? Word travels fast, always does, especially in this place. Suddenly, visions of Matty's demolished face come crashing through every single one of his carefully erected barriers. The image gets somehow jumbled up in his mind with the memory of Harrington's face that November night, the mess Billy's fists had made of him.

Billy's breath comes fast, and it feels like his heart is about to beat

out of his chest. He moves before he thinks, speaks even faster.

“That’s enough, Harrington.”

Steve’s eyes are wide and round, surprised, when they turn to meet his. Billy sees something there he’s never seen before: fear.

Steve’s tiny ex (or maybe not his ex anymore?) puts her body between them as Billy approaches, like she’s going to fight him for Steve’s honor or some shit, and the sight makes him want to laugh, but he just steps around them both, turns his most sinister smile on her as he goes.

“Relax Scrappy Doo, your boyfriend and I are just going for a drive. Unless he’s too *scared*.” It’s a dare. One he knows Steve will be hard pressed to turn down. He hears them arguing behind him, but he doesn’t turn back. Steve will come. And when she yells, “If anything happens to him, you’ll regret it Billy Hargrove!” he knows he’s won this battle.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you for reading! Comments are <3

PS- I make no guarantees, but cross your fingers for me, Stranger Fam--with any luck, I plan on getting out one more chapter before Season 3 premieres.

## 10. You Can't Go On

### Summary for the Chapter:

“What, um,” Billy swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I don’t—” Steve’s surprised to find he’s out of breath. “I don’t know. Do you want me to stop?”

*A discussion. A confession. A discovery. Everything changes.*

### Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings for previous chapters still apply here. Billy had a rough childhood.

I must be crazy to be posting this ten hours before Season 3 premieres. Oh well. Anyone else wanna come be crazy together?

“That’s enough, Harrington.” Steve has just enough time to think *Oh no* with his entire being, and then Billy’s stepping out from behind the Ford Bronco parked a couple spots down, and *Christ*, his eyes are like pure ice.

Steve had known this was going to happen. He’d *known* it. Why did he let Nancy goad him into telling her?

Billy moves closer, eyes on Steve, and Nancy steps between them, lifting her chin. She says something to Billy, who regards her with hostile amusement, but Steve can’t hear her words over the pounding in his own ears. “Nancy,” he says urgently. She doesn’t move. Neither she nor Billy acknowledges that he’s spoken, locked as they are in



some weird battle of wills. “Nancy,” Steve repeats himself. “Move.”

Billy won’t hurt her. That’s not what Steve’s worried about. But she needs to move, *right now*. Because Steve has probably just ruined everything, only there’s still a chance that maybe, just *maybe*, he can fix it, but he’s got only a tiny window of time to do so, before all the dark voices in Billy’s head kick in and deafen him to any truth that Steve might speak to salvage this. Every second that Nancy stands between them is a second that window gets smaller.

Billy tilts his head, and says, “Relax, Scrappy Doo, your boyfriend and I are just going for a drive. Unless he’s too *scared*.” He lifts that ice cold stare to meet Steve’s eyes. They seem to silently say, *Are you?*

Steve steps forward, places a gentle hand on Nancy’s waist, applying just enough pressure to get her attention. “Nancy,” he says again. “Please.” Finally, she relents, stepping to the side, her voice full of concern when she says, “Steve, *don’t*.”

“It’s okay,” he murmurs to Nancy as he passes. And because he knows her, adds, “*Don’t* make this any worse, Nance. This is between us. He’s not going to hurt me. I swear.”

As he says this, he never takes his eyes from Billy. He jerks his head towards the Camaro. *Lead the way.*

He knows what he must sound like to Nancy—but he’s not wrong. It’s not some phony reassurance to keep her from doing something stupid like calling Hop, or coming after them herself (and she would). He knows he’s right: Billy won’t hurt Steve now. Not with his fists, anyway.

Because the thing is, and he can barely admit this to himself (and only then in the farthest, darkest corners of his mind): there’s something—some *thing*—happening between the two of them. He’d called it friendship, once, but that’s not quite right; it’s something both less and more than that. It’s...a *bond*, the boundaries of which Steve can’t quite (or maybe just *won’t*) define. It’s...potential. Steve can see the potential, not just *between* them, but *inside* Billy too—just a glimmer of it, like a sliver of light passing through a storm cloud.

It's true, Billy's awful most of the time—mean and snappish and unpredictable, like a dog that's been kicked too many times—but...he could be more, if that sliver of light was given just the tiniest bit more room to well, *shine*. But it feels like the light could die too, could be snuffed out forever, that *Billy* could choose to snuff it out forever, and he's poised on razor's edge to go either way, and Steve can't help but feel like he has a responsibility to do *something* to keep that light alive. He likes the brightness of it too much to let it die.

He gets into the car expecting a fight, but instead he gets total silence, even as Billy guns the engine and peels out of the school parking lot, tires squealing.

"Billy, listen to me, it wasn't what you thi—" he starts, but Billy cuts him off.

"Shut the fuck up, Harrington," he snaps, eyes forward, refusing to look Steve's way. "If I want to hear more of your bullshit, I'll ask."

"Will you at least tell me where we're going?"

"Fuck you."

And that's that.

The drive isn't a long one anyway, and when Billy pulls down a long gravel path Steve knows exactly where they're going: the overlook at the quarry.

"Heh, you're not going to drive us off the cliff are you?" he tries to joke.

"Would anyone miss us if I did?"

Steve doesn't think he's serious, but just in case, he answers emphatically, "Yes!"

"Yeah, maybe they'd all miss you a little," Billy says as he rolls the car to a stop. Then he gets out and walks away. Right over to the overlook's edge.

"Oh, *shit*." Steve throws open his door and hurries out, panic gripping

him. Billy doesn't jump, though. Thankfully. He just sits down, right there at the edge, letting his feet dangle over the drop. Then he pats the ground beside him. Whistles like he's calling a dog. "C'mon, Harrington. Sit with me."

Steve hesitates and Billy huffs. "Fine, don't. Do what you want. I don't give a shit." He turns away, looking out over the quarry.

Steve sits down *very* gingerly, but he stays back a little way from the edge, crossing his legs so no part of him is hanging out over the drop. He leans back on his hands, tries not to look down.

"Who would miss me? If I jumped?" Billy's face is impassive when he finally turns his head to meet Steve's eyes. But there's a real question in his eyes.

"Billy," Steve keeps his voice low and calm, despite how his heart races. "Whatever it is you're thinking about, man, please, don't do it."

"Why do you care?" Billy's voice is raw. Steve struggles with the words, needing to get it right, but Billy treats his pause like it's an answer in itself. "Exactly."

He leans forward, looking down as if gauging the distance, then he closes his eyes, exhales, and leans back onto his hands, lifting his hips slightly, as if preparing to push off.

Faster than he's ever moved before, Steve scrambles into a crouch behind Billy, locking both arms around the other boy's waist, and then in one frantic motion, heaves them both backwards with all his might, pushing off hard with his feet. They land sprawled some feet away, Steve on his back, Billy in his lap.

Steve sits up, but refuses to unlock his arms, unwilling to let Billy go. "ME! *ME*, OKAY?! Me! I would miss you, so whatever the fuck it is you're trying to do, *stop*, okay? *Please*," he says urgently, gasping, face pressed into the back of Billy's hair.

Billy tenses all over, like he's thinking about fighting him for a second, then his body goes lax. "I wasn't going to jump," he whispers.

"Coulda fooled me." Steve takes in a slow, shaky breath, trying to

calm himself. He gets a deep whiff of the Billy's scent. The other boy smells...spicy. Warm. It's not a bad smell.

"Why...?" Billy shakes his head. "You don't even like me."

"That's not true!" Aren't they beyond this? Doesn't Billy know? And okay, it *was* true. Once. For good reason. And while it's true that Steve's feelings for Billy are still *beyond* complicated, he does...*like* him. Though "like" is maybe the wrong word. It's too simple for the jumble of emotions that Steve feels for Billy. "It's not true, Billy. I do."

"Bullshit," Billy spits. "You told her you felt sorry for me."

"No. Not bullshit. I swear," Steve says. "If you heard me say that, then you heard what came after." He thinks for a second. "Didn't you? Because I- I told her you're my *friend*. And I mean it. I always did. I'm not messing around. I promise." But Billy doesn't respond, so Steve rushes to add, "No, okay, I mean...you're kinda right. I haven't always liked you, 'cause we've got a history, you and me. But...I do care about you. Like," he swallows, "A lot."

Still nothing but silence from Billy. Steve gently bumps his head into the back of Billy's. Gives his ribs a little squeeze. "Do you...do you believe me?"

"...Don't fuck with me, Harrington," he replies finally, his voice rough. It's not the first time he's made this request of Steve.

Steve shakes his head solemnly, his forehead rubbing against Billy's hair. "I'm not," he assures him. "I'm not, I swear. I just, I—*look*, can we back a little farther away from the deadly one hundred foot drop before we continue this? I'm about to piss my pants here, man."

Billy nods.

Steve gives him a hand up, tugs him forward. He refuses to let go until they get all the way back to the car. They sit together on the engine-warmed hood. Billy doesn't even warn Steve not to scratch the paint, just sits there silently, his shoulders hunched and his head hanging down.

Steve's mind works frantically. He's *so bad* with words, and he needs to say this the right way. Needs every word to land, to hold the significance he wants it to hold, for once in his idiot life.

But before he can get there, Billy says wearily, "Why don't you hate me? You should."

Well, here goes nothing. "I thought I hated you, once," Steve says. "For a little while. But that's...whatever I feel for you now Billy, it isn't hate. I mean, half the time I want to shake you and half the time I want to...I don't know, hug the shit out of you or something. But I definitely don't hate you." He frowns, running a self-conscious hand through his hair. "I don't think I could now, even if I tried. I mean... you feel this, right? This...whatever it is...*connection* or something between us. Please tell me I'm not crazy."

Billy looks up at him, catches his bottom lip between teeth. "You *are* fucking crazy. But you're not the only one. I can't fucking stay away from you, even when I want to. You twist my head up, Harrington, and I hate it, but I can't stay away. I think...I think maybe you're the only one in the world who—who *really* sees me."

Steve throws his head back and laughs, feeling giddy, relieved, and more than a little slap happy. He rubs at the back of his neck. "I know exactly what you mean. I really do."

"Don't sound so happy about it. S'not a good thing."

"Why's that?"

Billy's still hunched over his knees. He stays like that for a long minute, then finally he sighs, and sits up straight. Rolls his shoulders, cracks his neck. Then he starts folding back the sleeve that covers his right forearm. With his wrist facing up, he holds the bare limb out for Steve to see. "Do you know what that is?" Steve doesn't have to ask what he means—there's a scar there, in the vulnerable skin just below the crease of his elbow, shiny and oblong, about 3/4 of an inch long, with a raised circle in the middle, slightly offset from the center.

Steve shakes his head. It's a burn, he thinks, but he has no idea what

would could make that mark.

Billy smiles humorlessly. "It's what happens when you take one of these," he pulls out his Bic and flicks it so the flame ignites, "And let it rip for a while. If you hold down the button long enough..." he pauses for a moment then releases his thumb so the flame disappears, presses the business end of the lighter to the inside of his palm a couple times, showing that it's not hot. Then he replaces the lighter in his pocket and says, "If you hold it down long enough, 'bout a minute and half, it gets hot enough to burn skin. They call it the 'Jarhead Test.'"

He face wrinkles in disgust and he looks away, casting his gaze out over the quarry. "They say only a true Marine has the stones to let it get white hot, and then hold it to his skin for a count of ten. *Semper fucking fi.*" He spits into the dead grass. "It's horseshit. Anyone can do it, if they're determined enough. Trust me. It's a long fucking count to ten, but it can be done."

Steve winces. "Billy..."

Billy shakes his head, never looking Steve's way. He continues. "That's not all though. You have to take a punch afterwards. Four of 'em, actually—one each from four of your buddies. Best pals. And you have to still be on your feet when they're done. And when it's over, that's when you've proven you're a man. A *real* fucking devil dog. *Oo-rah!*"

"*Billy—*" Steve tries again.

Billy finally turns to look at him. "My old man's a retired Marine, did I ever tell you that? No? Yeah, he is." He turns his gaze back out over the quarry. "His old Corps buddies used to come to our house all the time back in the day. They'd hang out, shoot the shit, reminisce about the *good old days*. I used to think they were so cool, back when I was little. Felder, Niwinski, Bronson, Patterson, Boes. A bunch of mean sons of bitches who, as it turned out, didn't have one ounce of patience for a smart-mouth, snot-nosed brat like me. S'why my old man liked 'em so much, I guess. All of 'em were just alike, but Felder, he was the worst of them. That guy *hated* me. Used to call me names. Fag. Pansy. *Nancy.*" Billy snorts at the irony. Continues, "He was

always bitching about my hair, said it made me look like a little sissy, 'cause it was long and all. Neil never said a word in my defense."

One corner of Billy's mouth twists in contempt. "But I fucking hated Felder too. Everything about him. 'Cept his car—she was a beauty. '79 Chevy Camaro. Navy blue. I wasn't allowed to touch her, wasn't even supposed to get anywhere *near* her. But I couldn't stay away. I was about fifteen and half, hadn't long gotten my driving permit, and I was fucking *salivating* for wheels of my own. Couldn't help myself—that car was like fucking catnip. Any time I thought Felder wasn't looking, I was there.

"Then one day, I got caught. See, I thought they were all in the backyard. And I figured I'd try out the driver's seat, see what it felt like. But Bronson was always running late. Always had some excuse about work. He was a cop. So, I think the coast is finally clear, and I've *just* made myself at home behind the wheel, when fucking Bronson shows up. Catches me in the act. Asshole drags me all the way to the backyard, makes me tell Felder what I'd done, in front of all of them. Felder said some shit, I said some shit back. I don't even remember what now. Probably told him to suck my dick or something. Neil almost took me down for it, right there in front of all his buddies, but Felder stopped him. I half-thought, hey, maybe he was gonna be nice for once, but nah. No such luck. He tells Neil that, since I thought I was tough enough to talk like a man, then maybe I was tough enough to prove it. And maybe it was time I take the Jarhead Test. He had the nastiest little shit-eating grin when he said it. I'll never forget it. And then he goes: 'Tell you what, I'll even make you a bet. You pass the test I'll give you the title to my car. Free and clear. But if you fail, you're gonna let your daddy hold you over the trashcan and shave off those pretty golden curls.'"

Billy smiles for a second then, a *real* smile. "Neil hesitated. He fucking hesitated. 'Cause he knows how I am. I think he knew there was a chance I might actually win. But Felder had no fucking idea." He snorts again. "I think Boes pulled his punch though, there at the end. He was the last one to go, and I was bleeding from the nose AND the mouth, and shaking all over, and sweating like a pig. Maybe he felt bad, I dunno. Good thing though, or I'd have ended up with a head like a cue ball, rather than the pink slip to my lady here. Those

guys were real assholes, but Marines keep their word.” He pats the hood of his car reassuringly. Then his face sobers. He turns to look at Steve, can’t quite meet his eyes.

“Billy,” Steve tries to start. “Listen to me—”

But Billy just shakes his head a little, one last time. “I’m just like them, Harrington. *Steve*. I’m...nothing good. You’re not...you’re not safe with me.”

Steve squeezes his eyes shut in frustration. Shakes his head. He needs to tell Billy how *wrong* he is. He never has the right words, but he needs to make Billy know.

Maybe he can show him.

He jumps off the hood of the car to stand in front of Billy. Flaps his hands towards himself. “Here, stand up. I want to try something.”

Billy’s suspicious look is back in full force. But Steve says, “No seriously, just...trust me, okay? Come on, stand up.”

Billy does, warily.

“Okay, I’m just gonna...” Steve wipes suddenly sweaty palms off on the front of his jeans and moves in closer, hands up in the universal signal for *don’t shoot*. “Don’t hit me, okay?” He steps into Billy’s space and slowly, tentatively wraps his arms around his back. When Billy doesn’t shake him off, he hooks his chin over Billy’s shoulder and pulls him in tight.

Billy’s arms hang limply by his sides. His chest hitches once, right against Steve’s, jostling their bodies. “What the hell are you doing, Harrington?” he asks, voice tight.

“I’m hugging you,” Steve says. “And this is the part where you hug me back.” There’s a pause. No response. Steve bounces a little on his toes. “Come *onnnn*, hug me back.” He gives Billy a few little squeezes to emphasize those last three words. And then he waits.

It takes almost a full minute before he feels it. He’s just about ready to let go and give this up for a lost cause when he feels two hands



press, ever-so-lightly, against his back, exerting almost no pressure, like Billy's scared he'll get burned if he touches Steve any harder. No one breathes. Then all of a sudden Billy just...melts into him, the tension leaving his body, breath coming out in a great, shuddering sigh. His arms tighten around Steve, and all of a sudden, they're hugging.

They stay like that for a long time. Billy's heart is *thundering* in his chest; Steve can feel the beat of it reverberate through his own body.

"If you tell anyone about this, Harrington..." Billy starts.

"Steve."

"What?"

"My name is Steve. You said it once. You can do it again."

"...if you tell anyone about this...Steve..."

"I know, I know, you'll kick my ass. Shhh. It'll be okay." He rocks them back and forth a little, like the world's easiest slow dance.

He laughs a little, face pressed against the side of Billy's head, a blond curl ticking his nose.

"What is it?" Billy husks quietly, subdued in a way Steve has never heard before. It's like the two of them have to whisper so they don't break this fragile thing that's settled over them. This peace.

"It's just...look Ma, I'm dancing," Steve says by way of answer.

"...Oh," Billy says. Then, "You're a weirdo, you know that Harringt—Steve?" But there's fondness in the words.

Steve pulls back and smiles at him. "Yeah I don't know if you've noticed; we're all weirdos here."

Billy dashes his arm across his face, swiping at wet eyes. His eyelashes are so dark and long. Pretty. Like a girl's. "Yeah well, speak for yourself, asshole." But it lacks the teeth it might have had if he'd said it before.

Billy frowns suddenly.

“What? What is it?” Steve asks.

Billy shifts in Steve’s embrace. Clears his throat. “I meant what I said before. Please don’t let me hurt you.”

“You mean like, physically?”

Billy shakes his head. “No, I wouldn’t do—I mean...I *have*, but not anymore. I mean, I do, sometimes still want t-to, but n-not you. I mean...*shit*,” he shakes his head again, growing frustrated. He sucks in a solemn breath, tries again. “What I’m trying to say is: there’s something *wrong* with me. Something that causes bad things to happen to all the people I care about...and then I lose them, and... and I...I don’t...”

Steve pulls him back into another hug. “Hey, I get it. I like having you around too. We’re tough, you and me. We’ll be okay.” He pets the back of Billy’s head with one hand, hooking his chin tightly over Billy’s shoulder again, trying to *will* reassurance directly into the other boy’s body.

He tries to get them to relax back into it, like before. But this embrace is different than the first. A little more aware of itself. A little more...*electric*, somehow. Steve shifts, dropping his face into the crook of Billy’s neck. He takes a deep breath, inhaling the familiarity of him, instinctively. It’s strange, realizing that—that the smell of Billy’s body is familiar to him. Not just familiar. *Pleasant*. Like...black coffee and cloves. Sweetness and warmth.

Not even thinking, he whispers, “How is it you smell so *good*?” His lips move against the bare skin of Billy’s neck as he says the words.

“Steve,” Billy groans, shifting against him. They’re close enough to each other that Steve can see the gooseflesh that rises along Billy’s neck, feel the shudder that races through his entire body.

“Hmmm?” Steve chases the scent up Billy’s neck, nuzzling behind his ear. Inhaling deeply.

“What, um,” Billy swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “What

the hell are you doing?”

“I don’t—” Steve’s surprised to find he’s out of breath. “I don’t know. Do you want me to stop?” He’s just breathing. He doesn’t actually mean to blow against Billy’s ear like that.

“I...*oh*.” The last sound Billy makes is more of an exhalation than an actual word. The sound of it makes Steve go hot all over.

He moves to press his lips against the sharp edge of Billy’s jaw. It’s not a kiss. He just...wants to know what the stubble feels like there. Against his mouth.

“Steve, c’mon. You don’t want to do this. You know you don’t,” Billy gasps.

“Yeah, I think I do.”

“No you—*hnnnnnh*, stop doing that! You—you don’t. This is just me, fucking you up.”

“Shhh, Billy,” Steve shushes him, pulling back just a little to look at his face. This can’t be Billy fucking him up—nothing about this feels fucked up. He means to tell him that, but one look at his troubled face shows Steve he won’t believe him. Maybe Steve can show him again though. He cups a gentle hand around the back of Billy’s neck, gives him a moment to pull away, and then he takes Billy’s mouth with his own.

*Oh*. Okay. He’s kissing Billy. Another boy. And he *likes* it. Okay.

It should be a battle for dominance. It’s not. It’s like, the two of them just...surrendering into it. He doesn’t even mind the stubble. Or the general lack of boobs. Maybe it should feel weird. But Billy’s mouth is so soft. And he makes these dark, husky little groans against—*into*—Steve’s mouth, so low they’re almost sub-vocal. It feels too *good* to be weird.

Steve tugs Billy into him, tugs his hips closer, moving his own towards Billy’s too. Not thrusting, just...eliminating all the space between their bodies. And *oh*, oh wow, he can feel where Billy’s getting hard behind his jeans, actually *feel* it as it happens. He’d

never realized that it felt like this from the other end. *So good*. And Steve, he's getting hard too.

It's a surprise, but not a shock. Has he wanted to do this before now? Yeah, he thinks maybe he has.

Maybe Steve's wanted this, wanted *Billy*, for a while now.

He wants to walk the other boy backwards, press him back against the hood of his car, and...just kiss him everywhere. Pop open the buttons of his shirt and use his mouth on every square inch of skin he bares. Spread his knees, and lay between them, so they're groin to groin, and just fucking *press*.

He wants to hold Billy close against his body and steady him while he *shakes*, like he's doing right now, trembling all over with arousal.

He fucking wants to do this forever.

And then, as soon as he thinks it, it's over. Billy's wrenching himself away, his mouth open, panting. Looking at Steve with dismay. Regret. Horror, maybe. Oh, no.

"It's okay," Steve starts, but it's obviously not.

Billy stumbles backwards, away from Steve. He shakes his head frantically. "Nonono, I can't, I can't, I can't, I fucking can't." Then he's in the driver's seat, starting the car.

Steve tries to stop him, "Billy, wait!" but he's too late. The car is moving, tires kicking up gravel as Billy speeds back down the path. Then he's gone, leaving Steve here, alone.

"Shit."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

For anyone wondering, the Jarhead Test isn't actually a real thing Marines do. It is something, however, that the psycho white dudes in my neighborhood used to do, back in high school. Shitty small towns, man.

At this point, I think I've got about one more chapter to finish out this story. But that may take a little while, because come tomorrow morning, I'm taking a writing break and going in for a ST3 deep dive.

Thank you to everyone who's read and left kudos and comments and encouragement!

I love hearing from and talking to you guys. Happy Stranger Things Eve!

## 11. Thinking Nothing's Wrong

### Summary for the Chapter:

"I won't..." Steve swallows, wrestling with embarrassment. And arousal. "I'm not gonna try anything. Just...just let me help," he whispers. "Please."

Billy laughs, but it's a humorless sound. "What makes you think anyone can help me?"

Steve curls his arm tighter around Billy's body, his palm pressed flat against his sternum. "Because...you break it, you bought it," he says. "Remember?"

*The chapter where the slow burn becomes an open flame.*

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone who's read so far. Sorry for the delay in getting this last chapter up. I actually wrote this one at the beginning, before I had anything else in the story; I always knew we were going to end up here. But certain developments in other chapters required I rewrite parts of this one and that...took a while. Yay for perfectionism...not.

Hope you enjoy!

(Please note the rating change)

PS- this motherfucker is unbeta'd. Apologies for any errors.

The walk back from the quarry takes nearly an hour. Which is a very

long time to think about the numerous ways in which everything has just gone to shit. At the very top of the list is the fact that he just ran Billy off—by pretty much *mauling* him right there in broad daylight. Billy Hargrove. *Boy* Billy Hargrove. His maybe friend. Who Steve just kissed—and *touched*—in a very *not* “just friends” way.

To be fair, Billy had also done his fair share of kissing. And touching.

Shit, they’d both gotten hard. They got hard *together*. They got hard *for each other*.

And like, what the hell? Steve’s not...gay.

...Is he?

No. No way. Okay sure, there have been moments where he...okay like, he’s watched Risky Business about a million times, right? And yeah, the the train scene makes him feel...things, and probably not just because of Rebecca de Mornay. But seriously, doesn’t everyone feel a little...*tingly* downstairs when they look at Tom Cruise? And if Steve’s jerked off a time or three to the memory of Sodapop’s shower scene in The Outsiders, well, so what?

Because he jacks it to the thought of girls too. Like, A LOT. He likes boobs. He likes *sex* with girls. He likes how it feels being inside of them. He’d liked—he’d loved Nancy. He’d *loved* her. So he can’t be gay. Right?

Right.

But that doesn’t stop him from chubbing up in his shorts every time he thinks about the feel of Billy panting against Steve’s mouth.

Shit.

It’s almost dark by the time he gets to his car. When he gets home, Billy’s not there. Neither is his stuff. Of course not. Fuck.

Steve tries not to worry about where Billy could be, or what he might be doing, wherever he is. He tries not to wonder if he’s just destroyed everything between them beyond all repair. He tries not to crave the burn of something sharp against the skin of his right hip, while he’s

at it. Doesn't really succeed at doing any of those things.

Billy doesn't come home that night. And he's not there the next morning either. Nor is he at school when Steve gets there. And the thoughts—the worries—come spiraling back in, twice as hard. As if they ever left. He'd slept like shit last night, and now his head hurts and his hip smarts and his stomach is in knots, and he has literally no fucking idea what to do.

Actually, he has one idea, but it involves doing a thing he'd promised Billy he wouldn't do, and...he's already betrayed Billy's trust once. He can't do it a second time.

...Can he?

He thunks his head hard against the inside of his locker door. "Nnnghhh."

"Steve? Are you alright?"

His head shoots up.

It's Nancy. Dammit. His stomach still gives that same achy little twist every time he sees her. *Still*. But today, it's only like, a half-twist. A quarter-twist, maybe. Today it's just another kink in the huge knot that's settled in long-term behind his belly button. One more drop in an already overflowing glass.

"Steve, I said—"

"I know what you said," he slams his locker door. "I'm fine."

"Clearly," she says, eyebrow quirked. "Things went well after he kidnapped you then, I take it?"

"Who?" Steve plays dumb, praying she'll just let it go. He should have known better.

"Billy Hargrove. The guy who's apparently living in your house? The one I was convinced was going to kill you when he practically abducted you from the parking lot yesterday afternoon? Thanks for calling to let me know you were okay, by the way."



"Nancy, shhh!" Steve hushes her. She rolls her eyes. He looks around, but no one is paying them the slightest bit of attention. "Yeah we, uh, we're all good. Totally good. All problems, you know...resolved."

Nancy doesn't look convinced. She gives him her most skeptical look. (Steve's been on the receiving end of that look many times in the past year—he'd recognize it from a mile away).

"We're all good, Nance," He repeats, because...could they *please* just move it along here? He's got enough to worry about, and the last thing he needs is another person involved in all...this. Making it even more complicated. "Look, I'm sorry I forgot to call. I've just got...a lot going on right now," he insists, then realizes. Shit. He forgot to actually get anything out of his locker. Dammit, he's losing it. He reopens the locker door with a sigh.

"A lot going on..." Nancy's eyes narrow. "Like what? The fact that Billy Hargrove is M.I.A. today?"

Steve shrugs one shoulder, avoiding her eyes and moves the locker door so it's between his face and Nancy's gaze. He wonders how long he can pretend he's actually still looking for something, using the locker door as his makeshift Nancy-shield. She's going to drag it out of him, just like yesterday, he just knows it. He can already feel the whole ordeal bubbling up his throat, turning in to words he can't take back once someone else has heard them.

Then, from his other side, "Did you ask him?"

Steve jumps, but it's just Jonathan. Oh, thank God. Someone new for her to focus on.

Steve slams his door again, grateful for the opportunity to change the subject. "Ask me what?" he chirps brightly, then mentally winces. He sounds like a crazy person. Or Mickey Mouse. Like a crazy Mickey Mouse, maybe. Thankfully, with Jonathan there, Nancy doesn't notice. Or maybe just doesn't call him on it.

"About the party tomorrow night. We're going, and we were wondering if you wanted to come with us," Nancy says. "That is, of course, if you don't have other plans?"

That's right. Steve had forgotten all about it. Saturday night—Valentine's Day. The Massacre.

The Valentine's Day Massacre has been a Hawkins party tradition since time immemorial (okay, probably just the '50s). Everyone dresses up like gangsters and gun molls, gets hammered, raises hell, hooks up, and then tries to forget about all of it the next day. You know, in the name of love.

Steve hadn't planned on going (because hello? Valentine's Day? Nooo, thank you), and he's no more interested now than before, but he tries to make conversation—anything to throw Nancy off the scent. Anything to keep the conversation from turning back to him... and Billy.

"The two of you are going to the Valentine's Day Massacre?"

"Yep! Wanna come?"

"Uh, no thanks. I do have plans. Totally. Since when do you go to parties, anyway?" That last is directed at Jonathan "I'd rather be dead than act like an actual teenager" Byers.

The corners of Jonathan's mouth quirk, just a little, as he looks at Nancy, fond. "Since Nancy says I should go to—"

"—And actually EXPERIENCE!" she injects.

"Since Nancy says I should go to and actually *experience* a real party before I graduate this year," Jonathan finishes, his dark eyes twinkling. Steve's never seen him like this before. So happy. So at ease in his skin. He wears it well. Probably better than Steve did, he thinks. And maybe that's an answer in and of itself. Or part of one, at least.

It's not that it doesn't still hurt to see the two of them together—it does. But he can see how they *fit*. In a way that he and Nancy never did.

His belly twists again. Suddenly he needs to be anywhere else but here. And he really needs to find Billy. Talk to him about...what happened between them. Figure things out. Because right now, part

of an answer feels like none at all.

“Well, have fun, enjoy the party, you two crazy kids. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” he throws them a wink and a lazy salute as he backs away, jaunty and light, giving his best imitation of a guy without a care in the world. He doesn’t let the smile fall from his face until he’s well down the hall.

“Wait! Steve!” And then he can hear Nancy jogging up behind him. He sighs. Attempts to wipe the flinch off his face before he turns around to face her. Tries to replace it with something more pleasant.

“Steve, seriously, are you okay?”

“Yeah sure, Nance, I’m totally good. Great, even!” He pastes another fake smile on his face to accompany the fake words.

“It’s just, you looked upset earlier. Like you were...worried.”

“Who, me? Nah, I’m swell. You know me—I’m always fine. Look I’ll catch you later, okay? I’ve got, you know—” he hooks a thumb over his shoulder, “—class. So. See you around. Have fun at the Massacre. Watch out for the punch, you know how Tommy likes to spike it.” And then he’s turning on his heel and praying she doesn’t follow him again.

She doesn’t.

Which is good.

Because Steve’s *fine*.

He actually doesn’t spend the rest of the day worrying where Billy might be. He doesn’t worry when there’s no navy blue Camaro squealing tires into the parking lot, godawful hair rock blaring out the window. He doesn’t worry when he doesn’t see curly blond hair at a locker in the Senior hallway, halfway down the hall from his own. He doesn’t worry at lunch, when there’s a noted absence of raucous laughter from Tommy H’s table. He doesn’t worry in fourth period English, when no one raises their hand to subtly correct Mrs. Teneman on the finer points of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. He definitely doesn’t worry about it at practice, when no one can stop any of

Steve's shots. Nope, no worrying here. Nothing to see, move it along.

He...might worry a little when the sun sets and he's still seen neither hide nor curly blond hair from Billy since the fiasco at the quarry, over twenty-four hours ago now. He worries a little more when midnight rolls around and Billy still hasn't come home. (And Jesus, when did that happen? When did he start thinking of his house as Billy's *home*?). He's blown way past worry and straight into full blown panic when he still hasn't heard anything from the other boy on Saturday morning. Or Saturday afternoon. Or Saturday evening, when the sun sets for a second time without any sign or word of Billy or his whereabouts.

He's agonized over his options all day. He could call Hop. He could. Maybe he *should*. Let's be honest, he almost certainly should. But he'd promised Billy, sworn to him multiple times: *no cops*. And if he breaks his word and calls Hopper, it will mean that he's broken every promise he's ever made to the other boy. Broken his trust in every way. And he...he just can't. Not yet.

But he can't just keep fucking sitting here either.

He makes the decision then, to go to the party. The Valentine's Day Massacre. Not to party, obviously. But he's already driven around Hawkins today, looking for the familiar flash of a blue sports car or the shine of blond hair, and he's come up with bupkis. And maybe he's wasting his time here, but there's a slim chance that Billy won't be able to avoid the siren song of readily available drugs, alcohol, and appreciation from his legion of adoring lackeys.

No way in hell Steve's dressing up like a gangster, so he just wears the same clothes he's been in all day, jeans and his red sweater. He takes a left on the way out of Loch Nora, heading southeast towards (where else?) the fucking quarry.

The party is exactly how he expects it to be—a bunch of wasted high school kids trying to fill their boring, empty existences with bluster, bravado, and booze. He finds those three B's in excess, but he doesn't find the fourth B (Billy) anywhere. It's a relief and a letdown. He'd feared (and hoped) he might find the other boy at his worst: drunk and belligerent and destructive, hostile and ready to fight. But by the

time Steve's been there an hour (an exhausting, grating, *torturous* hour—did he actually used to think this shit was fun?), he knows he's not going to find Billy here at all, belligerent or otherwise. He feels a fleeting sense of relief that Billy isn't on some self-destructive bender, and then the wheels of his mind start spinning narratives that are even more disturbing than the idea of Billy at his party-happy worst.

Billy passed out somewhere in the cold, so inebriated he doesn't know where he is. Billy getting the shit kicked out of him in a bar somewhere, going up against someone twice his age and size, too pissed to realize he's punching out of his weight class until it's too late. Billy, hurt. Billy, bleeding. Billy, *gone*.

Steve's had ample time to drive himself crazy by the time he decides to leave. He's almost back to his car, *still* agonizing over whether or not he should call Hopper, ready to spend the rest of the night scouring every street in Hawkins either way, when the cops come.

There are a lot of drunk kids to be rounded up, but Steve is stone cold sober, so he doesn't worry as he walks back to his car. Still, he catches a couple of sideways glances from several members of the Hawkins PD as he makes his way across the quarry—recognition in their eyes, or, no, not recognition, but...*acknowledgement* maybe, like he's been seen, catalogued, and allowed to pass. He's almost convinced himself that he's just being paranoid, when he gets to his car and finds Jim Hopper waiting for him.

"Hey, kid," Hopper says, and his words are innocuous, but everything else—the set of his shoulders as he leans against Steve's bumper, the tension in his dark beetled brows, even the angle of his ever-present freaking *hat*—says something is wrong.

"Chief..." Steve returns the greeting, apprehension at an all time high, "Everything okay?"

Hopper gives Steve a measured look, then tilts his chin at his Bronco, parked behind Steve's car, blocking him in. "Why don't you get in? Let's go for a ride. There's something I think you need to see. We'll talk on the way." And Steve begins to quietly panic.

But they don't talk on the way. The ride to...wherever they're going

is tense. Quiet. Hopper isn't forthcoming with any info and Steve is too scared to ask—too afraid of what he'll hear. He knows deep in his gut that something is very wrong, and he's praying, bargaining right now with the universe and whichever indifferent deity is in charge that...just please, *please*, don't let it be the worst option.

They arrive at a trailer park, the Bronco coming to a stop in front of a single-wide that sits apart from the other homes, near the shore of some lake. Lake Jordan maybe.

"What is this place?" he asks, knee bouncing.

Hopper slides the Bronco into park and lights a cigarette. Sits back in his seat, gaze fixed on the trailer, intentionally (and maybe a little sadistically) leaving Steve to squirm. Finally, just as he's about the yell, *What the fuck, Hopper?!* the Chief speaks.

"So. You know that Hargrove kid?"

"I—Huh?" Oh good, real articulate, Harrington.

Hopper finally looks at him. "The blond one. Billy. You know him?"

"Um, yeah. I know him," Steve says, feeling like he's admitting guilt to a crime he didn't commit.

"Good. I'm trying to fill in some blanks, and I'm thinking you're the man for the job," Hopper says, something dangerous in his tone. "So start talking," he growls, when Steve doesn't take the hint the first time.

"We uh, we go to school together. He just transferred in this year. He, uh...we kind of got into it, last November. The same night with the... *dogs* and the tunnels and the ah, you know." But Hopper just regards him silently, his face unreadable, so Steve rushes on. "We're on, uh, slightly better terms now, though. Me and Billy, I mean."

Hopper nods slowly. Takes a slow, thoughtful puff on his cigarette. Exhales. "Mhm. Great. Define '*slightly better terms*.'" That dangerous *something* still lurks in his tone.

"We're...uh. Friends?"

“Uh huh, right. Now would that be actual friends, or the *hypothetical* kind?” Hopper drawls, throwing Steve’s words from last month back in his face. Shit.

Steve swallows. “Actual. Actual friends.” And Steve will never, ever commit a crime in Hawkins. Not if he means he’d have to be questioned by this big, dangerous man, eyeing him sharply from across the car. Has he *always* been this scary?

“The actual kind that I get calls about at six in the morning, the day before a snowstorm?”

“...Yes?”

“Kid, are you actually going to elaborate on anything, or am I going to have to hang you up by the ankles and shake it out of you?”

“Um, okay. Okay. So, I found him. On the side of the road. The night before I called you. He was hurt bad. So I patched him up at my place, and then he stayed with me through the storm. We kinda... became friends. And when it was all over, he wanted to go back home, so...I took him home.”

“And?”

“And then he showed up at my door a couple of days later, needing to be...patched up again. And so I did.”

“And?”

“And I let him stay because he had nowhere else to go.”

“...And?”

“And he was still staying with me up until a couple nights ago, when we had a...disagreement. He took off and I haven’t seen him since.”

“And?”

“And that’s all! Christ! What the hell do you want from me, Chief?” Steve yells. He can’t stand much more of this. Why won’t Hopper just *tell him* what’s going on?

But the Chief is unmoved. He stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray, then leans in towards Steve and says, “So lemme get this straight: the guy beats the shit out of you last year, and scares the shit out of a bunch of kids at the same time, and your solution is to play Florence Nightingale AND halfway house to him? Does he have something on you? Or are you just that scared of him?”

Steve feels his face go hot at the implications there. “No! He needed help! And—and you help people that need it.”

“Even if he doesn’t deserve it?”

“...last I checked, we don’t get to decide who is and isn’t worthy of being helped! That isn’t how helping works!” he spits at Hopper, truly pissed now.

Hopper’s eyes are flat and unamused when they meet his. “Uh huh, right,” he growls. “Well then, if that’s true....why THE HELL didn’t you call me back for help before it got this bad??”

“Shit.” Steve cringes. *This bad*. His stomach twists again, painfully, harder than it ever did for Nancy. He has to know, “How bad is it?”

“I asked you first, kid.”

Steve wants to scream. Why does he have to fuck everything up so spectacularly, every single time? He should have called. *He should have called*. But. He couldn’t. He flounders helplessly, trying to explain. “Because Billy doesn’t trust cops. He’s like, really scared of them. Of you. One of his dad’s asshole friends was a cop and...you know what, it doesn’t matter.” He doesn’t feel like there’s time to tell the Jarhead Story right now. He needs to know what happened to Billy. “Point is, he’s scared, and he’s justified. And I...was scared too. I was scared that he’d run, and if he runs—” He means to finish, *he doesn’t have anywhere else to run to*, but Hop cuts him off.

“Looks like he ran anyway.”

Steve goes red hot all over. “Don’t you think I fucking *know* that?” he explodes. He knows better, but he can’t stop. “So why don’t you cut me some fucking slack, man, and instead of giving me the third



degree, just *tell me* what the hell is going on, Hopper, what the *fuck*?"

Oh, shit.

And now Steve's going to die, because Hopper is giving him that cool, assessing gaze again.

But—no, maybe not? Because now his face has gone strangely satisfied, like this was an interrogation and Steve just unknowingly gave up the goods. Hop turns his gaze back towards the trailer.

"What's going on is me getting reports of a public disturbance at the Corner Pocket and then going there to find the Hargrove kid three sheets to the wind and making more trouble than one lone idiot his age should be capable of. But then I go to haul him in, and the kid starts sobbing in the back seat of my truck. Begging me not to call his father. Hell, at least I *think* that's what he said—he's so drunk I could barely understand him. There's only one word I can get out of him that I'm sure I *do* understand. Wanna guess what that word was?"

Steve doesn't have to guess. He drops his head back against the seat, closes his eyes. "Harrington."

"*BIN-GO!*"

Steve winces. It's pretty exactly as he'd feared. Except... "Is he hurt? Did he hurt anyone else?"

"Not unless you count my back seat." Hopper sticks a thumb over his shoulder. "Someone's gonna pay to get the puke cleaned out of my upholstery, and it ain't me, just so we're clear."

Steve runs a tired hand through his hair and nods, resigned. "So where is he now?"

Hopper lifts his chin at the trailer. "If I'd taken him in to the station, I'd have had to book him and call his dad. But after he said your name, I remembered our conversation from last month. And something told me that maybe I should get your side of the story first." He pauses there, contemplating, and Steve decides to take a page out of Hopper's own playbook.

“And?”

The look Hopper gives him is most emphatically NOT AMUSED. But he says, “So I brought him here, until I could find you and get some answers. This is my place. Or, it used to be. Still is, on paper, but I don’t stay here anymore, for reasons I probably don’t have to explain to you.”

Steve nods. He knows Hopper lives somewhere off the map, for the sake of keeping Eleven safe. “Is he...he’s okay then?”

Hopper nods. “I left Officer Callahan on babysitting duty until I could track you down. He used to be a first responder before he came to work for me, so I figured he’d keep the kid from choking on his own puke until I could find *you* and figure out what the actual hell’s going on. So here we are.” Hopper’s mouth tightens then. “Hand me your keys,” he orders.

At Steve’s questioning look, he says, “You want to make him your responsibility, clean up after him? Fine. Have at it. I’ll have one of the deputies take your car back to your place. You work on him, and I’ll be back to pick you up tomorrow around noon. There’s food in the cabinets and the power’s still on. He’s all yours for the night. But kid, you need to know: this guy’s a mess. You got a plan?”

Steve blinks. “Not...exactly,” he admits. “I’ve just kinda been taking things one day at a time. I thought things were getting better. But...I don’t know. I think maybe I’ve fucked it all up.”

Hopper sighs, shakes his head. “Can’t help you there, kid. That’s between the two of you.”

Steve runs a shaky hand through his hair, messing it. “Yep.” He can feel Hopper’s eyes on him once again, scrutinizing. It makes him want to squirm.

Hopper rolls his eyes. “Whatever it is, just be straight with each other. That’s all you can do.”

Steve flinches. Being *straight* with each other is kind of the issue.

“Can—can I see him now?” he asks.

Hopper gives him one last measuring look, and for a second, Steve thinks he might be about to say something else. But then, without another word, he's heading for the trailer. Steve hurries to follow.

Hopper steps heavily through the front door, announces his presence loudly. An abjectly miserable moan sounds in response. Its source is a squirming, blanket-covered lump on the couch. "Oh I'm sorry, Princess, am I bothering you? Too bad!" Hopper booms. "How's he doing?" That last is directed at Callahan, who's sitting on a stool at the bar, reading the funnies from this morning's paper.

"Yeah, he puked again," Callahan says, obviously unamused. Hopper throws a meaningful look at Steve that says he's going to be cleaning *that* up, too. "Looks like he's in for a rough night, but he'll live."

"Yeah, that's what happens when you spend the better part of forty-eight hours on a bender," the Chief says without sympathy. "Remember what I said, kid. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon. And if he pulls this stunt again, I'll make sure you both regret it."

"More than I already do?" Steve says.

But Hopper doesn't answer, steering a mumbling, disgruntled Callahan out the door. "You owe me, Chief," Steve hears. He can't quite make out all of the Chief's response but he's pretty sure it's something close to, "Like hell. Now we're even."

Hopper pokes his head back in through the door. "One more thing. When I come back tomorrow, the three of us are going to have a talk." Then he's gone before Steve has time to do more than blink in astonishment.

*That's gonna suck*, but Steve guesses he'll burn that bridge when he comes to it. He has more pressing matters at hand right now.

He inches closer to the couch, unsure if he even wants to see the mess buried under the blanket now that he's here. When he folds the blanket back, he recoils, assailed by the sharp smells of vomit, body odor, and stale beer. "*Jesus Billy*, what the fuck?"

Billy just moans and flinches away from the light, muttering

unintelligible words Steve is pretty sure amount to “Fuck you, Harrington.” There’s vomit crusted down the front of his shirt, and his hair is matted with sweat and god knows what else. He’s a wreck.

But as Hopper so helpfully reminded him, he’s now *Steve’s* wreck. Though, to be honest, that’s been true for a while now.

“Shower,” he announces to the other boy. “A shower will make you feel better.” It’ll definitely make *Steve* feel better. He pulls the sour-smelling blanket all the way off of Billy, who definitely says “Fuck you, Harrington” then.

“Yeah yeah,” Steve acknowledges. “Come on, up.” He levers a whining Billy up into a sitting position, but that’s as far as he gets him. Standing on his own seems to be beyond Billy’s abilities at the moment. Steve lets out a noise of frustration, throwing his hands up in the air, and Billy takes this chance to flop back over, curling up into a ball.

“Fine!” Steve says, sick of feeling so goddamn *ineffective*. He leaves Billy to do...whatever he’s doing, and goes to acquaint himself with Hopper’s place.

There’s definitely still food in the cabinets, mostly of the non-perishable variety—rice, instant mashed potatoes, canned foods, ramen. He wonders how long it’s been since Hopper was last here. Based on the volume of undisturbed dust on the cabinets, Steve would guess the answer is probably “a while.” Maybe he hasn’t been back here at all since finding Eleven and holing up...wherever the two of them have been hiding out. Steve decides to forego checking the refrigerator, just in case. His nose has been assaulted enough for one day.

There’s a small bathroom off the single bedroom, with a medicine cabinet full of...everything. It ranges from the basics, shit like aspirin and Pepto, all the way up to the stronger stuff in orange prescription bottles that Steve doesn’t even bother to look at.

When he turns the sink on, the water comes out brown, but it runs clear after a minute. Steve assumes it’ll be okay to drink. He’s gotta start pumping Billy with fluids at some point, and Hopper would

have mentioned if the water wasn't safe.

The most important thing he discovers is the full-size shower in the small bathroom. *Thank God.* It's one of those shower/tub combos—he doesn't even want to imagine trying to do what he's going to have to do in a bath or one of those tiny shower closets.

Then magically, as if Billy knows Steve's thinking about him, he starts making *sounds* from the living room. Retching sounds. *Great.*

Steve rushes back into the living room, looking around frantically for something Billy can ralph into, but there's no time, and in a fit of desperation, he snatches the already dirty blanket off the end of the couch and drops it on the floor, grabbing the back of Billy's shirt and pulling him so his head is off the couch and hanging over the blanket. Steve has to turn his head as Billy heaves out the remaining contents of his stomach, mostly stringy yellow bile at this point.

WHY? Why does this shit always happen to Steve?

"You...owe...me...BIG TIME," he grits out between sympathetic heaves.

When Billy's done, he collapses bonelessly back onto the couch, completely wrung out. Steve stares at him for a long time, scrutinizing, trying to come up with a game plan. "We've gotta stop meeting like this," he sighs.

He leaves him there to go root around in the kitchen again, finally finds a trash bag under the sink that he can stuff the putrid blanket inside. He leaves it outside the door. He'll deal with THAT later. Right now, he's got bigger fish to fry.

Well, technically, he's got bigger fish to *bathe*.

It's not any easier to get Billy on his feet this time, but at least Steve is prepared. He half props, half drags the other boy all the way to the bathroom, sits him down on the closed toilet lid so he can get the shower running. Billy barely even opens his eyes from couch to bathroom.

Steam is filling the bathroom by the time Steve gets up the nerve to

start stripping them both. There's no way he'll be able to get Billy to stand under the spray on his own, not while the other boy does his best imitation of an inebriated rag doll. And it's not like they haven't showered together before. But the locker room isn't exactly the same thing as *actually* sharing a shower—not to mention the fact that he's tried helping Billy strip before, and *that* did not go over well. And that was before all the stuff that's happened since and...Steve's face heats for reasons that have nothing to do with the steam surrounding them, remembering the events of two days ago.

But he's the only other person here and...the only way out is through.

Steve takes his own clothes off first, stripping himself down to his underwear, then sets to work getting Billy's shoes, socks, and fouled shirt off. He's just starting on his pants, hesitating before *ever-so-gingerly* popping the button on his jeans and working the zipper down, when Billy mumbles, "Knew ya wanted to get me naked, y'big fucking queen." Steve snaps his gaze up to Billy's face and sees the other boy regarding him muzzily through slitted eyes. "Enjoying the view?" Billy slurs.

Frustrated anger arcs white hot up Steve's spine, straight into his chest. He straightens up from his crouch, brings his face close to Billy's. "Try. Harder," he enunciates. "Sing a new song. I've heard this one before, and I'm *immune* to it." Billy struggles upwards to do something, to stand maybe, but only succeeds in tipping himself face first into Steve's bare chest. Steve sighs, shaking his head. He pats the back of Billy's. "I oughta leave you to it, let you drown. Jerk." It comes out more fond than he intended. Billy mumbles something into Steve's skin.

Steve pulls him back and upright. He hates to even ask, but, "What's that?"

"You hate me," Billy moans, eyes closed.

"The problem," Steve tells him, "Is that I really don't. Okay, come on, up." He struggles to get the other boy to his feet, elbows hooked under both armpits for leverage. "On the other hand, you could," he grunts with the effort, "You know, TRY being less of a dick, you know?" Billy groans something unintelligible and vowel-less in

response, but he doesn't fight Steve as he props him against the wall to strip off his remaining clothes. Steve hesitates for a moment before shucking off his own underwear, then, averting his eyes, he pulls Billy's down too.

Bracing Billy under his arms, Steve coaxes him to lift one foot..."Okay, up, over over over, that's good, you got it...and now the other one, come on..." and then they're in.

Under the hot spray, Billy sort of...melts listlessly forward, resting his body against Steve's. Steve has to wrap his arms around Billy, hold him close so his limp weight doesn't tip them both over—so close that Billy's pretty much straddling his leg. And *oh*, oh shit, that's Billy's dick, soft and pressed in its entirety against Steve's thigh. Steve closes his eyes and breathes slowly through his nose, calling up images of the Demogorgon and its canine counterparts to keep himself from getting hard. The tickle of Billy's wet hair, the press of his face into Steve's neck—none of it is helping.

He jostles Billy, trying to shake him back to something resembling full consciousness. Steve can't hold him up AND help him get clean. "Billy, *psst*, Billy! Buddy. Come *on*, man, I need you to wake up! Help me out here." He shakes him a little more roughly, and something gets through to the blond boy's inebriated brain. Billy raises his chin just enough to regard Steve with bleary eyes.

"Wha—? Harringt...?" he slurs. Steve doesn't say anything, just nudges him until he turns around in Steve's arms, pressing his back to Steve's front. The new position presses Steve's dick against the round curve of Billy's ass, a fact Steve tries to studiously ignore. With no success. Ohhh, crap. *Danger, danger Will Robinson!*

Steve doesn't know what to do. He remembers hearing that you're supposed to put a drunk person into the shower to sober them up, but this doesn't seem to be helping. Like, at all. And he can't take much more of this...

Maybe it's supposed to be cold water? He shudders at the thought, but he's out of options. They're pretty much stuck like this until Billy's more with it. And maybe the cold water will solve two problems. Steve marches Billy forward until he can reach the temperature

knobs, and then, before he can think better of it, twists the “Hot” knob all the way off. But Billy is pressed all the way forward, almost flush against the wall, and so Steve’s back catches the brunt of cold water as it knifes down onto them. He yelps and backpedals, taking Billy with him, until Steve’s out of the stream and Billy’s now the one catching the cold spray against his face and the front of his body.

It takes a few seconds, but then...there it is. Billy comes up spluttering and flailing.

“Fuckfuckfuck!” he screams, feet trying to backpedal so hard he’d have taken them both down, if Steve didn’t have him held so tightly against own body. Feet firmly planted.

“Chill, it’s okay, man, you’re *okay*.”

“What the *fuck*—fucking let me GO, Harrington!” Billy yells, words still slurred but remarkably more *with it* that he was just a minute ago.

“Easy, easy,” Steve soothes against his ear. “I’ve got you. S’alright.”

“I know you’re got me asshole, that’s the problem! You’re trying to kill m—oh shit, *owwww*.” He clutches the sides of his head.

“Nah, I think you were doing a pretty good job of that on your own before I got here,” Steve retorts. But he props a now-steadier Billy against the shower wall so he can move past him to turn the hot water back on.

And then Billy starts retching. Again. Steve grabs him around the waist, bracing him against his body as the spasms wrack Billy’s feverish frame, helpless to do anything but hold him as his stomach tries to empty contents that are already nonexistent. “Jesus, Billy, how much did you drink?” he murmurs absently, rubbing his back. But Billy probably can’t hear him, much less answer, over the sound of his own dry heaves.

Finally, the gagging fit ends, leaving the other boy spent and exhausted, resting limply back against Steve. “*Fuck*,” Billy moans.

“Do you want to try to wash off with some soap?” Steve asks, looking



around vainly for some, but Billy shakes his head weakly, which is probably just as well, since all Steve sees is one dried-up old sliver of bar soap glued to the shower ledge. At least the water has washed the worst of the scents of puke and sour sweat off the other boy's body. Steve makes him spin around, dunk his head under the spray, lift his arms so the water can get to his pits.

When that's done, Steve asks, "You wanna get out or stay in the shower a little longer?"

"Out," Billy croaks.

Steve had found clean towels in the little hall closet earlier, but Billy barely tolerates a cursory drying, shrugging off Steve's help. He staggers away, hair dripping wet and without a stitch of clothes on, to collapse onto the couch, where he curls up miserably. Steve forces a glass of water into his hand, then takes the ratty old quilt he'd found in the hall closet and throws it over the other boy with a word of caution. "Drink. And don't puke on this one, Hopper's already pissed at us both as it is." The sound Billy makes in response could mean "Thanks," or "Got it," or his favorite, "Fuck you." No way to tell.

Steve throws all of Billy's vomit-fouled clothes into the washing machine situated in a little alcove behind sliding doors in the hall, and after a thought, shrugs and tosses in everything but the briefs he's wearing, too.

Mindful of all the fluids Billy's lost, Steve picks up his empty glass and refills it, meaning to coax him into drinking some more, but when he returns, he finds him wracked with full body shivers, eyes clenched shut, shaking so hard his teeth are chattering.

"Billy?" He puts a hand on the other boy's shoulder to rouse him and — "Holy shit, you're freezing."

Warm from the adrenaline and the lingering heat of the hot shower (and maybe the feel of Billy's naked body against him, maybe just a little), Steve hadn't noticed how cold it is in here. Until now. Shit.

How is it easier to babysit a bunch of middle schoolers while fighting

mutants from another dimension, than to take care of one nearly full-grown guy?

Doesn't matter. Steve's gotta get him warm.

He turns the dial on the thermostat up high and hopes the old boiler, or whatever it is heating this joint, can handle the strain. He searches, but can't find anything else in the way of blankets. Until he enters the lone bedroom. Hopper's old bedroom. The bed's still made with blankets and a heavy comforter. Steve strips it all off. Hopper clearly hasn't slept here in a long time, and it might be better to beg forgiveness than ask permission and all, but Steve draws the line at sleeping in Jim Hopper's bed with Billy. There's taking a chance and then there's just plain being stupid, and even Steve has a line of idiocy he won't cross.

He makes a nest of blankets in the middle of the living room floor and rouses Billy. "C'mon buddy, let's move you somewhere more comfortable." Billy shivers harder when Steve gets him up, but he goes without complaint. He withdraws once he's tucked under the covers, hunching his shoulders and curling into a tight ball again. He's shivering so hard that the blankets vibrate.

Steve reacts quickly, moving before he can think about it too hard. He slips under the blankets behind Billy and cuddles up close, throwing his arm over him and tucking his knees in tight behind his.

"Harrington," Billy breathes, apprehension in every syllable. "Steve..."

"I won't..." Steve swallows, wrestling with embarrassment. And arousal. "I'm not gonna try anything. Just...just let me help," he whispers. "Please."

Billy laughs, but it's a humorless sound. "What makes you think anyone can help me?"

Steve curls his arm tighter around Billy's body, his palm pressed flat against his sternum, tucks him back securely against his own body. "Because...you break it, you bought it," he says. "Remember?"

Billy makes a noise, a pained, skittering inhale, going tense all over. But then he gives a long sigh, and his body relaxes into Steve's, shivers subsiding.

Steve doesn't remember falling asleep, but he must have, because the next time he opens his eyes, there's purplish light hazing in through the windows, the earliest signs of the coming dawn. The trailer has warmed significantly, especially underneath the blankets. Billy's rolled over to face him some time in the middle of the night, and they're curled into each other like two parentheses, wrapped up tight, legs intertwined.

They'd huddled together for warmth on the air mattress, all those weeks ago, but...it was nothing like *this*. This...rewrites Steve's definition of reality, this incredible discovery that he likes the intimate feel of another man's legs between his own, not smooth and soft like a girl's, but muscular and solid, covered in raspy-soft blond hairs.

And *oh*, Steve likes the hot, hard length of Billy's penis pressing against the inside his thigh even better.

He's starkly aware that there's nothing separating them except the underwear he'd put back on last night, and he doesn't mean to shift like he does—it's just the tiniest of movements, an unconscious, sleepy shift of his hips—but the resulting sensation lights Steve's whole body on fire.

There's a quiet gasp. Steve looks up to find Billy's eyes on him. They'd drawn so close in sleep that their noses are nearly touching. "Oh," Steve breathes. "Are you—are you okay?" he asks quietly.

Billy gives him nothing. Just shrugs, biting his bottom lip. But his eyes...his eyes fucking *yearn*.

Oh God. Steve feels the echo of it in his own chest, and he can't take it. He just reacts, doesn't even realize what he's doing until he's already done it—slipped forward, closing the scant centimeters between them, and bussed one soft, hot kiss against Billy's mouth.

Billy sucks in a breath. He pulls back a little, wide eyes darting all

over Steve's face. Then with aching hesitation, he closes his eyes and presses his own lips back against Steve's.

It's a deep kiss, searing and sucking and desperate, but it's not nearly long enough.

Billy pulls back and sighs, belly-deep and desperate. With shaking hands, he pushes out of their embrace, rolling onto his back, untangling their legs. "I'm not a fag," he whispers.

But Steve's arm is still there, laid out over his belly, fingers splayed across his ribs, and he makes no move to move it as he stares up at the ceiling with haunted eyes.

"You sure about that?" Steve asks, and his voice shakes, but his palm is steady as he lets it quest across the other boy's belly and *down*—not all the way, but far enough to tease. He hates the ugly word Billy just used, he *hates it*, but this...this thing happening between them is real.

The sound that Billy makes in response to Steve's touch is so small, so restrained, that Steve wouldn't have heard it if they weren't practically on top of each other.

Something has to happen now. Either this tension between them breaks or they do.

Steve pets back up the taut skin of Billy's stomach, and then down again, going slow, repeating the motion again, and then again, hand dipping just a little lower each time, never getting low enough to take him in hand but...coming oh-so-close the last time.

"Tell me you don't want this then, Billy. Tell me what I'm feeling—what *you're* feeling—isn't real. Say it."

Billy whimpers for real this time, wet and breathy. He squeezes his eyes shut. "I can't, I can't, I can't," he breathes, and Steve almost stops altogether, because it's the same words Billy had used two days ago, after they'd kissed, right before he ran.

Then Billy says, "I'm not right. I'm fucked up in the head, Steve. Don't let me fuck you up, too." One tear slips out from between

clenched lids, rolls down the side of his face.

Steve moves in closer, kisses it away. “*Shhh*,” he whispers, aching. “It’s okay. You’re okay. You’re not fucked up. We’re not fucked up, Billy.” He cups Billy’s jaw, pressing gentle kisses to his brow, his cheek, the corner of his mouth. Keeps petting the skin of his belly, way down low, as he says, “This isn’t fucked up. It’s just...it’s just love.”

Billy turns haunted blue eyes on him. “You don’t love me.”

When he’d spoken, Steve had meant the thing happening between their bodies, not their hearts, but he thinks...ah God, he thinks he *might*, just a little.

“*Shhh*. Listen to me, I just mean...I mean it’s okay that this feels good,” he whispers, stroking his hand low enough to feel where the trail of hair below Billy’s navel starts to spread out into something more. “We’re not hurting anyone. There’s nothing wrong with this. Or us.”

“It’s not...natural,” Billy groans, chest hitching.

“Oh yeah?” Steve asks. He closes the infinitesimal space between them, noses at Billy’s ear, whispers into it, “Because I’ve got to tell you, none of this feels unnatural to me. Feels pretty freaking instinctive, actually.”

He’d never imagined he’d find himself in a moment like this, but now that he’s here, he knows in his bones that it’s *right*.

“You don’t get it! Fucking *listen to me!*” Billy growls, rolling them over so he’s on top of Steve, straddling him. His fingers wrap tightly around Steve’s wrists, pressing them down into the blankets on either side of his head. “This is *wrong*. It’s trouble. It’s—*a-ahh!*” he cries out, arching his back as Steve leans up to lick at his nipple.

“Does this feel wrong to you? Really?” Steve asks. He feels a little...a little mad with it when he places a wet, open-mouthed kiss against Billy’s clavicle, then licks his nipple again, adding the barest graze of teeth. Billy lets go of Steve’s wrists to fist the blankets, moving his

hips desperately as Steve takes the taut, pebbled nipple into his mouth, rolling the other between thumb and forefinger. Jesus, he *wants*.

“Well, does it?” Steve pants against him.

“Sh-shut up,” Billy stutters, shaking his head.

“No, no, I get it. I feel it too! I have since that first weekend we were together, really. Remember when you read my palms? You were just touching my *hands*, and I got so fucking hard for you, Billy. I was scared I was going to come right there.”

Before that weekend, Steve had spent months feeling like a paper boy. Like a ghost. Like the remnants of a guy who used to be—used to be King, used to matter, used to be *real*. But being around Billy, it makes him feel *here* again.

He knows Billy feels it too. Knows he's felt it since before Steve even knew “it” was a thing. He gets it now—why Billy would never leave him alone. It's like there's been something inside Billy all along, straining involuntarily towards Steve, like a magnet towards metal, when the only way Billy knew how to get closer was with insults and fists.

There's been something inside of Steve straining back.

It isn't the only thing straining at this point.

“Does it feel the same for you?” Steve asks, at the same time lightly wrapping his hand around Billy's hard dick. Holy shit, his *hand* is around Billy's *dick*. Wow. “So fucking good, like nothing else has ever felt?” His voice is deceptively calm, belying the way his heart trips double-time, *triple*-time, against his ribs. He strokes his way up the shaft and Billy makes a hurt noise, high in his throat, desperate and aching, and strains forward against Steve's hand.

Steve stops. Lets go. It's dirty pool, he knows—practically cheating—but he needs Billy to be here, for real. He needs to know that Billy's all-in, and he needs to know that Billy knows it, too.

He needs to know Billy wants it, wants *him*, without a hand on his

dick, coaxing him there.

But he's so fucking dizzy with his own arousal. He takes some deep breaths, trying to get his body under control enough to carry on. "You have to tell me, Billy," he pants in the other boy's ear, nosing against his earlobe. "Do you want me to? 'Cause I won't, I *can't*, if you don't say yes. Please, say yes."

Billy grabs his wrist with both hands and pulls it back between his legs, rolling them both over onto their sides. He threads a hand through the hair at the back of Steve's head, something hot and dangerous flaring through his eyes as he brings them nose to nose. "*Fuck* you, Harrington. *Steve*. Fuck yes. You wanna hear it? YES. *Please*, yes," he groans.

Steve strokes him from root to tip, swiping his thumb over the head, and experiences the singular pleasure of watching Billy Hargrove's face clench in ecstasy, mouth open, eyes shut, sweat already starting to slick his forehead and chest.

It's a little weird, stroking someone else's dick, doing the motion backwards from the way he's used to. There's something different about it—an ease with which his hand slides down Billy's dick, nothing but a little precum to slick the way.

Steve had kind of known already. Not from school—it's just basic locker room etiquette to avoid checking out another guy's jock, right? And besides, the guys at school knew way better than to pick on Billy Hargrove, if they'd ever looked. But Steve had noticed it that day last month, when Billy was in pain, when he'd begged Steve to look at him down there, to see if everything was okay.

Steve had seen, and then immediately forced himself to not think about it. To forget.

Because there's knowing, and then there's *knowing*.

Now he most definitely knows.

"Oh wow, you're...you're uncircumcised." It comes out a little louder, a little more breathlessly than he intends. Billy groans, but it's not

from pleasure this time. He puts a hand over his eyes. Gives a shivery little thrust of his hips. "Fuckkkkk, Harrington, c'mon."

Steve hadn't meant to ruin the moment, he's just never known anyone who wasn't circumcised before. He's fascinated, using his hand to make the smallest, shortest strokes up and down, so he can watch the way the skin slip-slides underneath his fingers, back and forth, back and forth, over the head and back down again.

Billy's obviously pretty sheepish about the whole thing, but Steve's desperately curious. "Is this a California thing?" he pants.

"No, it's a—*fuck*, why the fuck are you all so freaked out by an uncut cock out here Bumfuck, Indiana?" Billy says, breathless.

*You all.* Steve goes hot all over at the phrase, and not in the good way. He's dying to know who else has been looking at Billy's dick, much less had the chance to give commentary, kind of wants to punch whoever it is a little; but he squirrels that irksome little bit of curiosity away for another day. Instead he says, "Come on, tell me. Is this a California boy thing?"

"No dipshit, it's a—" Billy ducks his reddening face sideways into the pillow they share, like he wants to hide. "It's a *me* thing. My mom, she...she was a big hippie. She didn't believe in circumcising, thought it was mutilation. Apparently there was a big scene in the hospital when she refused to let the nurses take me."

"Oh wow."

"I know it's weird, alright? I get it. Y-you don't have to, if you—"

"Are you kidding me? It's fucking hot is what it is," Steve says against Billy's mouth, interrupting him before he can find yet another reason to pull back. "I mean, holy shit, look at you." He looks down to where he's still cradling the other boy's dick in his hand, wraps his second hand around the base to stabilize it, and with forefinger and thumb, gently pushes the foreskin away from the head, runs his thumb over the shiny, sensitive-looking skin there. Billy makes a harsh noise in the back of his throat, eyes clenching shut, body convulsing as achy little beads of precum squeeze their way out of



the slit, spilling over Steve's knuckles.

Steve stops immediately, lets go. Maybe he shouldn't have pushed it back like that. "Did I hurt you?" he asks.

Billy shakes his head and tightens the hand knotted in the hair at the back of Steve's neck, bringing their foreheads back together. He presses his mouth desperately against Steve's. "Jesus Christ, you fucking asshole," he whispers between hot, hungry kisses. "What are you doing to me?"

"Whatever you'll let me do."

Billy throws a leg over Steve's hips, pulls him in closer, so Steve's fist is pressed tight between their bodies.

"I already said yes, Harrington. Fucking yes. Fuck me up. I don't care. Whatever you want. Just don't take your fucking hands off me."

Steve meets Billy's wide blue eyes, sees the openness there, and the panic alongside it. He means to say something reassuring, but what comes out is, "Jesus, you're gorgeous." He's said the words to other partners before, in the heat of the moment, and thought he meant it, but he's never meant it the way he does now, looking at this beautiful, broken, kindred boy.

Billy presses his face into Steve's neck, but not before Steve sees something shatter there. He just keeps moving his hand, needing to give him what he needs. Needing to watch him come apart.

Billy cries out, pulling Steve close as he can possibly get, spreading his legs and humping his hips frantically into the motions of Steve's hand, and *oh*, there. There it is—Billy's coming in a desperate, panting gush, spilling hot between their bellies and onto the blankets beneath them. Steve strokes him through it, marveling.

Billy whimpers, wrapping strong fingers around Steve's to still his hand when he becomes too sensitive, and Steve can't stop himself then. He pushes his own underwear down over his ass, not even bothering to get them all the way off, just going far enough to get his dick out. He wraps his cum-slick hand around himself, stroking

roughly. *Shit*, it's not going to take much at all.

Billy's watching him with wide, pleasure-softened eyes, panting. "You can do it on me, if you want," he whispers, and that's all it takes. Steve has just enough time to nudge him onto his back, and then propped on one elbow, half-straddling him, he comes all over Billy, spilling onto his chest and his flat stomach.

After, even though they've finished, it doesn't feel...over. Steve still can't stop pressing kisses to Billy's skin—his sternum, his shoulder, his collarbone, the underside of his chin. Billy just stares at him dazedly, blinking like his lashes have gone heavy. Steve stretches up to place a slow, thorough kiss against his mouth, and Billy kisses back, and it's so hot it's fucking surreal.

But...something's wrong. Even as he kisses Steve back, Billy's body is starting to stiffen. And not in the good way.

Steve pulls back. "What?" he whispers, petting Billy's sweaty hair back from his face. But Billy shakes his head. He stares up at the ceiling, eyes gone distant, and refuses to meet Steve's gaze. "Billy, please," Steve begs. With gentle hands against the sides of Billy's head, he turns the other boy's face to his. "C'mon."

Billy's eyes flick over Steve's face for a second. Then his face goes carefully blank. Hard. "This can't happen again," he says.

Steve's heart sinks like a stone. "But we—this was *good*...I don't understand—"

"What's not to understand? We *can't*. If people find out...don't you get it? *Fuck*, we gotta get up," Billy fists his hair, knocking Steve's hand away. "Where are my clothes? We have to—we have to clean everything up before the cop gets back." Billy starts up but Steve catches him.

"Hopper won't be back until noon."

"Harrington, listen to me, *please*. You can't trust him. He's—I know how guys like that are. They're all the same. They're bad. Please." His chest heaves, desperate eyes meeting Steve's.

Steve pets his hand down Billy's arm, trying to calm him. He starts, "Hopper's my friend, Billy. I trust him. With my *life*, if it comes down to that. I know you're scared, I am too, but your dad can't—"

Billy grabs Steve's forearm, stopping his motions and his words in their tracks. He tightens his fingers. "You don't KNOW what he can do!" Billy hisses. He scrubs harshly at the tears that slip free, a growl of frustration ripping itself from his throat as he turns his head to the side, scrubbing his face into the pillow.

Call it a hunch. Call it a lightbulb moment. But all of a sudden, Steve's remembering the things that Billy's said to him over the last month, putting the pieces together.

*The thing you gotta to understand is that Neil hates anyone who's different than him...*

*Because I'm mad that Maxine gets to be happy, and I don't? Yeah, that's me.*

*Yeah, right. You and I both know that "good kid" is going to tell his merry little band of creeps that we were sleeping together, and then they'll tell everyone they know, and pretty soon everyone in Hawkins will know, including Neil!*

And God, how many times has he heard Billy say it? Heard him beg: "No cops."

*But Bronson caught me. See, he was a cop...*

Billy's fear. His paranoia. His hatred of cops.

Steve hears Hopper's words from the day before: *but when I go to haul him in, he starts sobbing. Begging me not to call his father.*

Everything clicks into place. It all makes sense. "Fuck. Oh, man. What did he do?"

Billy shakes his head, not understanding. Or, just denying, maybe.

Steve asks, gently as he can, "There was someone else, wasn't there?"

Blue eyes meet Steve's in shock, going wide. "What?"

"Back in California. Another boy. And your dad hurt him. With...with the help of his cop friend. That's it, isn't it? I'm close, right?" The last bit rises in a query, but Steve already knows that's what happened. He *knows it*.

Billy gasps, his face going pale. "How the fuck did you know that?"

And there it is. Shit. He should have realized. A tell-tale pressure starts to build behind Steve's eyes. "Shit, Billy, I'm sorry. You've been telling me about it since the beginning. It just...you know, takes me a while to figure things out sometimes. I'm so sorry." He presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth, takes a slow breath in through his nose, trying to fight back the prickle in his eyes, the stinging in his sinuses. "Can you...will you tell me his name?"

For a moment, Billy's eyes search Steve's. Then his face crumples. "I can't. I can't. Please don't make me," he begs. He curls into himself as he sobs, covering his eyes like a child, his mouth pulled down in a rictus of misery. Steve reaches out and curls an arm around Billy's back, gathering him in close. "Okay," he says. "I gotcha. It's okay." He braces Billy against his own body as the other boy sobs convulsively, biting back tears of his own.

It goes on a while. Billy sobs like his heart has been broken, and even once he runs out of sound to give voice to his pain, his body continues to convulse with silent, sporadic sobs. Finally he gives a wet, exhausted sigh, and goes limp against Steve's chest.

Steve doesn't want to push, but he needs to say it. "You're safe. WE'RE safe," he murmurs. Because he needs him to know. "You don't have to tell me today. I'm here any time you're ready to talk. You can trust me."

Billy's eyes are wet when they meet his, tears clumping his thick eyelashes together. He searches Steve's face. "Yeah?" he asks. "You gonna tell me what this is?" And then Steve is gasping, a high, punched-out sound, as Billy presses a thumb against his right hip, where the sore, bloody stripes are just starting to scab over again. Billy takes his thumb away and strokes the unmarred skin above it,

almost apologetically. “Or how about you just tell me what actually happened to Barbara Holland?”

Steve goes cold all over. He shakes his head, throat closing up. He can barely get the words out. “Billy...I—I *can't*.”

Billy flinches, nodding like he was expecting Steve’s response, but it hurts him anyway. “I know,” he says. “It’s too much. You couldn’t hand it to someone else to carry, even if you wanted to.”

And damn his words hurt.

Because he’s not wrong. But he should be. God.

And Billy’s not yet done breaking Steve’s heart, turns out. “I can’t do this, Harrington,” he says. “*Steve*. I wish I could, but I can’t. I wish things were...” he closes his eyes. A single tear spills out, rolling down the bridge of his nose before dripping off to land on Steve’s arm where it’s pillowed under Billy’s head. “There’s no point in wishing, but I do.”

Steve tries and fails to hold back his own tears. Why did he bother to hope things could be different? This is his life now. *These days*.

He rubs a rough hand down his face, trying to get himself under control, because he knows that if he falls apart now, he’ll never be able to put the pieces back together again.

“Yeah. Right, no. I get it. Okay. Yeah,” he says, trying to keep his voice steady. He should move. He’s gotta move. He starts to sit up. “You were right—we should start getting cleaned up. Hopper won’t be here until noon, but—”

He’s getting up, when Billy stops him, wrapping a hand around his wrist. “The cop—Hopper—you sure you can trust him?”

“I meant what I said—I’d trust him with my life,” Steve replies.

“Then...if you're sure he’s not back until noon—if you're *sure*...could we...could we just stay here like this? Just for a little while longer?” Billy asks.

Steve hesitates, his chest tight. Everything hurts. And this will hurt worse. But if this is the only chance he's ever gonna have to feel Billy against his body again...

"Please," Billy whispers.

"...Okay."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So I promised you guys a happy ending, and we're obviously not there yet. Mostly because Billy and Steve are assholes who wouldn't bow to my writerly will (\*flips table\*). But I'm not done--there's an epilogue to follow, and, based on the way I'm feeling at the moment, likely a sequel to this fic as well. Thanks for hanging with me! <3

## 12. Epilogue: Home, Tonight

### Summary for the Chapter:

Steve makes a decision. Billy makes a stand. Hopper makes his entrance.

### Notes for the Chapter:

\*Madison Montgomery voice\* Surprise, bitch! I bet you thought you'd seen the last of me!

Okay, but seriously, it's been rough couple of years for us all, huh? It's been nearly two years since I posted the previous chapter. And THREE AND A HALF YEARS since I started this story. And most of it has been an uphill fucking battle. My neurodivergent brain means I love the writing, but the writing doesn't always love me. And my internal editor is the cruelest of taskmasters. I've re-written this chapter so many times. At one point, it was up to like 14,000 words, and it still wasn't anywhere *near* being done, and I had no idea how I was ever going to make it work. And the truth is, there was no "Aha!" moment. I just kept trying, and then taking breaks, and trying again (and at some point removing a good chunk of that 14,000 words to use instead in the sequel—yes, you read that right), over and over, until I woke up this morning, and wrote about four paragraphs, and read it back to myself, then went, "Huh, I think this is it." And here we are.

I've never managed to finish writing a whole story of this length before, and I know it's been a while, but I'm SO PROUD of this fic, you guys. I don't know if this is the ending anyone was hoping for, and I don't know how many people are even still reading this, but if you're seeing this and you've ever dropped me a kudos, or a comment, or a note on Tumblr, just know I saw it, and I loved it, and I am more thankful

to you than I can possibly express, short of a Vulcan mind meld. Thank you especially to [lhni](#) for literally years of kind words, and [littlekingxthrashtash](#) for what I'm pretty sure are the coolest comments in the history of fic comments, you guys are the best.

(Also, CW for some major internalized homophobia.)

Steve.

Matty.

Steve had figured out what had happened to Matty. Oh god, *Matty*. *Steve*.

It's too much. Billy loses the thread for a while after that, the inside of his head going white and staticky, devoid of everything except for panic and despair and the knowledge that he has utterly, utterly fucked everything good he's ever had. Especially Matty. Especially *Steve*.

Except he'd never had Steve. Steve was never meant to be his. That's why he'd run, after the quarry. After they'd kissed. He was trying to keep them both safe. From Neil. And from the world, and what it thought of boys who kissed other boys. But in the end fate, in all its cruel fucking vagaries, had thrown Steve right back into Billy's path. And Billy, weak piece of shit that he is, had let it happen. It. The thing they'd done together on the floor of some stranger's living room. The one thing he'd sworn he'd never do.

*Let it happen?* sneers that familiar voice in the back of Billy's head, the one that sounds so much like Neil. *You didn't let it happen. You made it happen, little queer. This is all your fault.*

And it was. It *is*. It's always his fault. And Billy's never hated himself more. The shame clamps down on him hard, on his whole body, doing its best to grind his bones into grist.

Then the cop arrives. Gets there at noon on the dot, just like Harrington had said he would. And things go from bad to worse.

By then Billy's showered and Steve's showered (*separately*), and



they've redressed and washed the blankets and remade the bed and systematically erased any evidence of the mistake they'd made together in the hazy pre-dawn light, with barely a shared word or even a shared glance between them.

Now they sit at opposite ends of the couch, and even this far apart Billy can see the way Steve's hair clings damply to the bare, vulnerable nape of his neck, and something about the sight brings back the hazy, drunken recollection of standing naked together in the shower last night, the sybaritic sense memory of Steve's body against his, bare and wet and holding him *safe*, and then once again he's thinking about all the things that had come after, the things they'd done together, in the purpling pre-dawn light, and *Jesus* he just wants to lean over, press his mouth against that neck, taste the moisture on his tongue, crawl over into Steve's lap to be held again, unzip his pants and do the same to his own, press forward until they're skin to skin, groin to groin, and let Steve's hand slip down to caress him, cup him, maybe even slip back behind his balls, to touch, and press, and then, and then...

*Billy, you stupid fuck! ENOUGH!*

He digs short, ragged nails into the soft flesh of his palm, *hard*, wishing he could scream, wishing he could slap himself, wishing he could smash his head against a wall, *anything* to just snap himself out of it, to end this fucking mad *wanting*, but there's no time, because from the door comes three swift knocks, and then it's swinging inward, and Billy nearly comes out of his skin.

A shape fills the entryway, the silhouette that of a man with wide shoulders, his face in shadow, so tall his head reaches nearly to the top of the frame, and fucking *Christ* Billy remembers the cop who'd herded him into the back of a squad car last night being pretty big, but he must have been even more shit-faced than he'd thought. Because this man is a fucking beast by the light of day, and *no*, no fucking way, no matter what Steve may think, there's no way this guy is his *friend*. There's no way this huge fucking monster of a human being has anything resembling *friends*.

The big man walks straight towards the couch, stopping right in front of it to level them both with a cool, assessing stare that activates

something atavistic and electric in Billy's cells. Pure instinct has him shooting to his feet, shooting *to attention*, squaring his shoulders and meeting the cop's eyes and refusing to flinch as the big man looks him over from the toes up.

Steve's on his feet a split second after Billy, his gaze slip-sliding warily from Billy to the big cop and back again. He takes a half-step forward, almost but not quite putting himself between Billy and the cop's path of approach.

"Billy..." Steve starts, "This is—"

Billy cuts him off. "Yeah. I know who he is." He acknowledges the other man with an upwards tilt of his chin in the cop's direction.

"Good. I know who you are too," the cop drawls, clearly unimpressed. "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, the two of you want to stop looking at me like I'm the Big Bad Wolf, come to blow your house down?"

Billy doesn't move. Doesn't take his eyes off the man.

*Aren't you?* He wants to say. Instead he asks, "So what do you want then?" trying and failing to keep the snarl from his voice.

"Okay, why don't we all just take a breath?" the cop responds, his tone laconic in a way that verges on patronizing. Neither of them move, and the cop's resulting sigh is an exasperation-soaked sound. He waves one hand lazily in the air in a parody of surrender. "Okay, at ease, soldiers. I come in peace. "

Still neither of them moves, and the expression on the cop's face flits quickly from exasperated to incredulous to full-on *pissed*. "Okay, seriously? Both of you sit down. Now!" he barks.

Billy folds quickly into the couch. Steve sits too, his movement once again lagging a second behind Billy's.

Shit. It was a mistake to comply so easily. And an even bigger mistake for both of them to put themselves on a level beneath the cop, rather than maintaining a strong, united front. He half expects the big man to advance on them now, to step into their shared space,

press his advantage with intimidation and physicality, to use those big, meaty fists of his to do the thing Billy's been waiting for...

But instead he just takes a seat in the chair opposite them, removing his hat and running his hand through his too-long, non-regulation hair.

The cop's sigh this time is a weary, impatient thing. "You know, I expect this—this defiant, *I-am-Spartacus* shit—from the kids. But not from the two of you."

Kids? Billy's confusion must show on his face, because Steve says, "Hopper has a daughter. You haven't met her, but she's friends with your sister, and Dustin, and...and the rest of the party."

"Oh. Okay?" Billy shakes his head. And? What the hell do Max and her weird little band of misfits have to do with anything anyway?

"He doesn't know," Steve is sitting up straight as he tells the cop. An expression flickers across his face, there and then gone. "About El, or...anything."

"Right. That answers that, at least." The cop nods, leaning forward over his steepled fingers. "I'm assuming, since you made it through the night and you're both on your feet this morning, that the old place didn't give you too much trouble? You found the aspirin and the blankets? And the uh, washing machine?"

He gives them a pointed look, raising one eyebrow, before glancing to the blanket folded across the back of the couch, and for one heart-stopping moment, Billy thinks, *he knows*. But then he realizes that the blanket the cop is indicating is the one he vaguely remembers the other guy, the younger, skinny one (another cop, he thinks) throwing over him when he lay shivering and sick on the couch, the front of his shirt covered in his own puke.

"Oh, uh, yeah." Steve leans forward, mirroring the cop's posture. "Didn't find the aspirin, but we uh, found everything else we needed. We made it through okay."

That's debatable. But Billy keeps his mouth shut.

They keep talking, Steve and his cop “friend,” all just trivial shit, at least as far as Billy can tell. He mostly tunes it out, concerned instead with the weird moment he’d just witnessed, right after Harrington had assured the cop that Billy knew nothing about his daughter, when fear and panic had briefly flinched across his face before he could hide it.

And that’s how Billy is sure: no matter what Steve says about being “friends” with this guy—and shit, maybe he actually he thinks he is, because Steve Harrington has a bad habit of making friends with the worst kinds of people, Billy is living, breathing evidence of that—Steve’s scared of him too.

“Billy.” It’s Steve, gently calling his name.

“Huh?” Billy realizes that they must’ve been talking to him. Maybe for a while.

“See? Talking,” the cop says, pointing back and forth between himself and Steve. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Billy shrugs. Crosses his arms over his chest. “Depends,” he spits. “What is it you want to talk about?”

“I want to talk about anything *you* want to talk about. As long as it’s the truth.” There’s something in the way the cop’s gaze travels between from Billy to Steve that tips Billy off, and he thinks, *oh God*. He was right before. The cop *does* know. Billy doesn’t know how he knows, or how *much* he knows, but he knows something, suspects it at least, and whatever it is, it’s more than enough. Billy’s stomach twists, and he wants to moan in despair.

“Look, Hop—” Steve starts, shifting to the edge of his seat and drawing the cop’s attention his way. Dammit.

The cop’s stare is eerily calm, amused even, as it drifts back to Steve.

Oh Christ. Billy’s pulse is thundering in his ears. The sense of danger in the air crackles over his skin, lifting the hair on his arms, at the back of his neck. It’s happening all over again, and there’s nothing he can do to stop it.

And it's all his fault.

He decides then. Makes his plan in that exact moment. It's a stupid one, there's no denying it, and it's going to get his ass kicked, no doubt, *best case scenario*. But it's all he's got. And...and it's better than the alternative. Because he can't watch it happen again. Not to Steve.

He swallows. Screws his balls on tight. Sits up straight and squares his shoulders. Then he does the only thing he can do.

"Fine. I'll talk. I'll tell you whatever you want to know," he breaks in, interrupting what's probably an impressive attempt at deescalation on Steve's part. "I'll sing like a fucking canary, if that's what you want. But not with him here." He hikes a thumb in Steve's direction, does his damndest to keep his expression nonchalant. "You only need one of us here to find out what you want to know anyway. Right? So send him home, and then you and me can talk about anything you want."

"Oh yeah? You're sure?" the big man asks, face inscrutable.

"I'm sure. But only on that condition. Otherwise I'm not saying shit. And neither is he." Billy lifts his chin, resolute. That's another mistake—Billy knows what shows of defiance do to men like this. But if he can just keep the cop's focus off of Steve long enough to...

There's a small noise from Steve's side of the couch, a quiet, dismayed noise, and the sound of a body shifting, and Billy makes the mistake of glancing over at him, meaning to send a silent plea—*just play along Harrington, please*—but instead turns just in time to see the pained betrayal spilling across the other boy's face like blood from an open wound. Billy wants to hold his gaze, to communicate silently, let him see that Billy isn't...he's not trying to hurt him. He's not pushing him away, or whatever else Harrington might think, even though that would be the best option for them both. No. He's *pushing him out of the line of fire*.

But Billy can't afford to take his attention off the cop for that long.

*I'm sorry, he thinks at the other boy. But I need you safe. You'll get it one day.*

Or he won't. Doesn't matter. Billy's gotta do what he's gotta do.

The cop narrows his eyes at him, coolly assessing. Strokes a hand over his bearded jaw. "This means no lies, kid. I ask a question, you answer it to the best of your ability. No exceptions."

Billy swallows. Nods his assent with a clenched jaw. He has no idea what he's going to have to say—no idea how much the cop knows, much less what the cop wants to hear. But he can wing it. He'll get through it like he always does. As long as...

"Anything you want. As long as we have a deal. Just. Just let Steve go home, and forget he was ever involved." That last comes out as a plea, and for a second Billy thinks *shit*, because he's just tipped his hand, and you never, *ever* do that, not with men like this—

But then the cop lets out this chuff of a noise, a sound Billy doesn't think he's ever heard before—part scoff, part exhausted laugh—as he closes his eyes and rubs hard at his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Alright kid, have it your way. Come on, Harrington, you heard him. Time to go."

Steve gapes at the cop, like they haven't just been handed the best reprieve they're gonna get. "Hop, no. What the hell? You can't be serious! This is ridiculous—"

The cop gives one decisive shake of his head. "Nope. You heard your buddy. He talks, you walk. Sounds like a fair deal to me. Come on now, on your feet, kid. You're out."

He wraps one big, beefy paw of a hand around Steve's elbow in an attempt to escort him to the door. But Steve shrugs him off. Stutter-steps back and throws up one pointed index finger as if it'll ward the cop off. "Just...give me a minute. One fucking minute. Okay??"

Even the cop himself looks astonished, and in that terrifying, pants-shitting moment, with Steve's insolence practically echoing in the air around them, Billy wonders if he's got the stones to actually step between Steve and the big cop's fists.

"One minute," the big man says finally. Flatly. "I'm going out to the

truck. And one or both of you better be ready to talk by the time I get back.” Then he’s gone.

Billy turns to Steve in disbelief. He glares at him, anger and fear renewing their never-ending war for control inside of him, clashing like two wild animals in his throat. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Don’t you get it? You need to go, *now*,” he growls.

Harrington shakes his head, his hands stuffed deep in his pockets. He refuses to meet Billy’s eyes. He scuffs one sneakered-toe into the carpet like he’s got all the time in the world, and somewhere inside Billy’s body, anger once again wins the battle.

“Harrington, I swear to GOD—”

Steve silently holds up a hand, and something about the agitated way his arm moves, about the way he still won’t look at him, forestalls whatever Billy had meant to say.

“You have to tell Hopper the truth. *Everything* that’s happened. The way your dad treats you, all the stuff he’s done, whatever happened with that guy...your guy...tell him all of it. Just...be honest with him. He’s a good guy, and he’s here to help.”

“Are you *fucking* kidding me? Did we both just witness the same conversation? Harrington, there’s no way that guy’s gonna—”

“Okay, shut *up*.” Steve’s eyes are blazing when they finally meet Billy’s. He’s breathing heavy, nearly panting. “There was no fucking conversation, because you cut me *out* before it could ever begin. And fine, okay, whatever. I get it. I know what...I know what I’m like, okay? I pushed you this morning. Last night. Whatever. And I shouldn’t have. I know you don’t—” Steve voice cracks, and he stops. Takes a deep breath. Rubs at the back of his neck. “I know what this isn’t. Okay? I know what we’re not. I’ve got it. And fine, you know what? It doesn’t matter. But you can’t keep *doing* this, man. You need to let someone help. You can’t go back home. And...and I guess we both know you’re not coming back to my place. And if you don’t want me to...to—” He cuts himself off, raking both hands through his hair. Lets out a big shuddering gust of air. Starts again. “*Look*, I know you don’t trust anyone. But you came to me when you had no one

else. So if you ever trusted me, if we were *ever* friends, even for just a minute, then trust me now. *Tell him*, man. All of it. Let him help.”

He steps in close, cups the side of Billy’s head in his right hand, fingers curled at the back of his neck, thumb caressing the skin in front of his ear. Billy can count his eyelashes, can feel his breath on his mouth when he says, “You gotta let somebody help. *Please*.”

Harrington’s gaze flits down to Billy’s mouth, and Billy thinks he’s going to try to kiss him, right there, with the cop on the other side of the door. Worse, Billy thinks he’s going let him. But Harrington just looks at him, pain in those pretty brown eyes and repeats, “Please, Billy.”

Then he’s letting go and stepping back and turning away.

And for a second, one awful fleeting second where the inside of his head is a searing, desperate *scream*, Billy wants to call Steve back. To trust in his shitty, half-cocked plan and spill his guts to the cop, to have Harrington there beside him holding his hand through the process. Figuratively.

Or maybe even literally.

But he ruthlessly squelches the urge. Billy’s spent the last two months being a selfish bastard, taking everything Steve Harrington had to give and offering shit in return. Hell, he’s spent most of his life doing that, when it comes down to it. But he fucking refuses to do it to him this time. Not here. Not now.

Then he’s gone. (And Billy’s alone. Again.)

Then the door opens, and Billy’s head snaps to the side. Sees the person standing there. *Oh shit*. (Or not.)

## Notes for the Chapter:

So, there you have it. This isn't where Billy and Steve's story ends, it's just where we're leaving them for now. I mentioned a sequel at the top of the page,



and I meant it. These guys have a whole lot more story to tell, and I mean to tell it. I'm a slow writer, so there's no telling how long it will take, but I'm in this for the long haul, so stick with me, you guys. We'll get there.